

INFERNO!

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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

YOU MAY have noticed a new little detail was added to this page last month. (Or you may not, I suppose. Perhaps you grab your new Inferno! and turn straight to the first story and never read these bits. If it was a choice between this waffle or some kick-ass SF action courtesy of the mighty Dan Abnett, I know which page I'd be reading!) As of last month, we have started listing our "forum" web address, along with the suggestion that you, gulp, *Talk to us!*

What we have done is set up a new community message board, on our website, where anyone can pop along and discuss anything related to the Black Library. On the board you will find heated debate and reasoned argument in about equal measure. The Black Library acolytes drop in to add an official verdict now and then, and even the likes of Dan Abnett and Gordon Rennie have been known to pop by and soak up the atmosphere. In other words, if you are interested in any or everything to do with the Black Library, you should check it out.

With our new, highly visible public profile, we have been fielding all manner of questions from readers. It seems that some of you still don't believe that you are actually allowed to send us in your own stories. So I

thought I'd use this space to try to lay to rest any misunderstandings.

Firstly, we *will* look at story proposals from anyone. You don't have to be a professional writer. You don't have to work for Games Workshop or in the gaming hobby at large. You don't have to be over a certain age, or live in a certain country. To be honest, we wouldn't care if you were a three-headed Chaos mutant from a distant planet who was only three years old in Earth years – providing you followed our two very simple rules.

Be true to the spirit of the Warhammer worlds – and be any good.

That means, you send us characterful action stories of a war-torn future or a war-torn fantasy world. You don't send us any stories featuring comedy orcs or orks. You don't send us battle reports without any real characters or plot. You do know how to write (obviously) and also how to rewrite (an invaluable talent in any dedicated writer). That might be where it looks like we have a thing against younger contributors. It certainly ain't policy. If you're good, we want you!

Here's one extra point – you must only send us a proposal for your story. That means, you don't send us the entire story itself. You

certainly don't send us a complete novel! (You know who you are!) You don't send us half a synopsis and say 'I'll tell you the cunning surprise ending when you buy the story'. That drives us nuts!

THAT SOUNDS like a lot, you may cry! Well, in fact there's even more – because if you look on our website, you'll see a far more detailed set of guides for writing stories, drawing pictures and even scripting comic strips. Check them out.

But just before you rush off to your browser, you might also want to know what we offer in return. First up, of course – hard cash! In fact, we pay better than most of the more famous SF magazines around. More importantly, perhaps, we also publish you, out there in public for all to see. The very best stories may even make it into one of our short story paperbacks, sold all around the world. And the best story writers then get offered a novel deal too! A pretty fair exchange, I'd say. So keep sending in those stories!

Marc

Marc Gascoigne
Editor

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THAKA. PROUD ITHAKA. Ocean world. Cradle of Snakes. The armoured dropship turns like a comet in high altitude, streaming fire like a comet. On its white-hot hull, the double-lopped serpent insignia of the Iron Snakes Chapter glows, incandescent...

Sergeant Priad, leader of Damocles Squad, unlocked his seat restraints and lumbered in full armour to the nearest porthole. He stood with his hands braced against the hull wall either side of the port. Beneath him, through the luminous streams of re-entry fire, he saw the oceans, the dark tumult of vast, cold water, the thrashing frenzy of the deep, Ithakan seas.

The dropship swooped, levelled and ceased to burn. Low, low over the ocean top it skimmed, assailed now by hurricane salt-winds and kilometre-high waves. Seunenae, the folding wall of iron, bane of every wyrm-hunter.

Priad saw the bright reflection of the racing dropship flashing off the dimpled, roiling darkness below. He saw marysae, the white water foam. He saw the boiling cauldrons of ulbrumid, the wyrm-spoor.

Ithaka. Proud Ithaka. Ocean World. Cradle of Snakes.

They would be making planetfall soon. A minute or two. Time for the squad leader to unscrew the copper flask and make the Rite of the Giving of Water.

Priad had not been home for six years. And this was home. This was Ithaka.

Salt-water ran from his eye corners. The Rite had begun. Removing his glove, Priad wiped the tears from his eyes and marked the emblem of the Iron Snakes on the bulkhead. His men watched him do it.

Sometimes the Rite was special. Sometimes, you didn't need the flask.

The dropship streaked west across the sky like a tracer round, over the fishing villages and orub-groves of the archipelagos, basking in the sun, out towards the stilt-rocks of the Primarch's Causeway. These great towers of

rock rose from the water like spines in a two hundred and eighty eight-kilometre curve where the archipelagos met the open ocean.

Priad had already given the dropship's pilot instructions. The ship slowed, adjusted and hove down towards Sulla's Rock, a thirty-metre stack dominating the trailing western lines of the Causeway. Ocean-faring hookbeaks and smaller littoral scale-birds burst from their roosts on the stack at the shrill sound of the dropship's downjets. They mobbed and circled, clacking bills and crying into the wind, the sunlight flashing off their grey flight-scales. White water boomed and erupted around the stack's base.

The dropship shuddered and settled on the flat top of the stack, its three landing claws extended and firm. The hatch opened with a clank, flooding the cabin with cold sea-air and the boom of the ocean.

They felt it on their faces. All of Damocles squad were un-helmeted. Priad led them out into the buffet of the stack top. As one, they breathed in the clean metallic stir of the open water. It was overwhelmingly intense.

For years, their senses had been siphoned through the relay systems of their armour. Now they were exposed raw, in the wind. The olfactory receptors built into their skulls amplified the scents of the place a million fold. Priad sighed. He could smell the ozone in the fleeting wind, the lime-stink of the scale-birds guano. He could detect the aroma of saline mucus in the bivalves clamped to the stack's base, the oil slick of a sounding rocaloe shoal ten kilometres out.

The citrus in a glass of grain alcohol poured twenty kilometres away in a waterside tavern in the archipelago.

Too much.

Priad crunched across the salt-crusted rock to the lip. Below him, at his toes, a giddy drop to the water. Hookbeaks turned and banked in the rising spray, cutting through the brief rainbows the vapour makes.

CRIMSON STORM

An IRON SNAKES STORY

BY DAN ABNETT

He looked back to his men. Kules. Xander. Pindor. Natus. Andromak, with the snake-standard flapping between his shoulder blades. Scyllon. The pilot and his assistant had also emerged from the dropship, kneeling a little way behind the main group to show their respects.

'In the name of the Primarch who sired us, in the name of the Chapter which binds us, in the name of the God-Emperor who rules us, in the name of Ithaka... let this which was Ithaka's be Ithaka's again.'

Priad unstoppeder his copper flask and let the last of the water trickle out. The spattering droplets fell away down the side of the stilt, twinkling in the sun. This was the Rite of Returning. Every Iron Snake carried a flask of sacred life-water from his homeworld to anoint his actions across the galaxy, for the life-water comes from the ocean and the ocean is the blood of the Emperor. Now, on returning, what little remains must be given back.

One by one, the men stepped to the brink and poured the contents of their own flasks away. When all had finished, Priad, Andromak and Xander returned to the edge and emptied three flasks whose owners had not made it home. The life-waters of Calignes, Illyus and beloved Memnes. Then Kules, Scyllon and Natus stepped forward, bringing the eusippus, the copper urns. As the oldest of Damocles, this last duty fell to hawk-eyed Pindor, not the sergeant.

As Priad intoned the Lament of Dysse, Pindor unscrewed the lid of each eusippus in turn and shook out the grey ash. Soft, loose, light, it sieved away into the wind and returned like the water to the sea. They could smell it. Microscopic motes on the wind. The smell of death and glory.

Calignes. Illyus. Memnes. Fallen to the archenemy on Ceres. Gone, but never forgotten. In his armour's hip-pouch, Priad had the prepared statement of their lives, actions and deaths, sealed and ready to be placed into the archive of the Chapter House.

'Look!' said Pindor, catching Priad's arm. 'Look, there!'

Out beyond the stilts, barely a kilometre distant, the ocean boiled and seethed. Ulbrumid. Wyrm-spoor. The great whirl was midnight black under the churning froth of white water. Thousands of sea birds wheeled and spiralled above the massive upsurge.

For a moment, one great coil of serpent broke the froth, horn-plate dazzling as it caught the light. Then it was gone, the ulbrumid fading, and the sea birds dispersing.

'A good sign, a good omen,' said Pindor.

Priad nodded. The great snakes of Ithaka had taken back their own.



'YOU HAVE performed the due rituals?' asked Lexicanium Phrastus. Priad nodded.

'Sir, the Rite of Returning is done. This morning, on the homeworld below. We went there directly before coming here.'

'I see.' Phrastus walked round to his writing lectern and took a holoquill from the energy well. 'Their names?'

Priad had been gazing out of the tower chamber's pressurised window, looking across the rockcrete fortifications and the barren crags of the moon to where Ithaka, green-white, was just then rising over the horizon.

'Names?'

'Of the fallen, sergeant.'

'Ah.' Priad sighed. 'Calignes, Illyus, Memnes.'

The Lexicanium wrote the names down.

'Any record of deeds?'

Priad took the sealed scroll from his hip-pouch and handed it to the Lexicanium. 'Full orders of merit, in detail and all particulars. They all have my highest commendation.'

'These will be catalogued.'

Priad unslung the narthecium from his shoulder and placed it on a side table. Inside, in self-locking sterilised tubes, lay the precious progenoid glands taken from the fallen. With Memnes dead, Priad had been forced to cut the glands out himself.

Phrastus rang a bell and summoned apothecaries to take the narthecium away.

'You will need new blood,' said Phrastus, setting aside his quill and coming to join Priad.

'Yes.'

'Captain Phobor has asked me to personally assist in your selection.'

'I am honoured, sir.'

'I have prepared a list of phratry petitioners. All of them new recruits of the highest quality. They are itching for selection into an active squad. And Damocles has a worthy reputation.'

'I'm glad of that, sir.'

'You lost your apothecary, didn't you?'

'Memnes. Yes, sir.'

'That is the hardest choice, in my experience. There are two promising candidates, both newly raised to that rank. Sykon and Eibos. I'm sure one or other will suit your needs.'

'I'm sure, sir. But I was hoping for Khiron. I heard what happened on Cozan. I thought—'

'Khiron? Oh no, no. I'm sorry, brother. That just won't be possible.'

Priad looked around. The scent of the Chapter House seemed suddenly intensely sterile and cold.

'Not possible?'

'The Emperor grant you grace,' said the Lexicanum. 'Welcome back to Karybdis, brother.'



KARYBDIS. Fortress moon. Chapter House. Barefoot and dressed in a loose white robe, Priad stood on the marble deck of the observation platform at the summit of the Chapter House's fortress. From here, he could see out across the mighty defences of the Iron Snakes' bastion, across the sloped turrets of the earthshaker guns, the massive curtain walls, the hardpoint blisters of the Hydra batteries. He could smell stone, prometheum, fycelene. The crude power. This was where the Iron Snakes' legacy took flesh, and from here they marched out to conquer the stars in the Emperor's name.

Priad had spent two hours in the armourdrome with his men as Chapter functionaries slowly removed and blessed every segment of their mark seven Imperator battle-plate and took it away for overhaul and repair. Then an hour soaking in the warm baths of the balneary, in deep dishes sculpted from the polished coil-plates of great wyrms. Then the plunge-pools and the cold scrubs, the brusque ministrations of the wooden thryxus to purge and scrub the skin and exoskeleton, the application of warm, glossy

crub-oil, the salving of sore body plugs and inflamed bio-link sockets.

Their hair had been oiled, combed out and coiled. Their faces shaved and smeared with depilatory wax. All Iron Snakes in the regular troop levies were clean shaven. The wax treatment kept their faces smooth for years at a time. The irritation bristles and whiskers growing under a full-face helmet that might be worn for months at a time was considered a distraction from the focus of combat.

Washed, oiled, scrubbed, anointed. Priad felt cleaner and rawer than he had in years. His skin tingled. The perfume from the oils and unguents adorning him seemed noxiously sweet. They assaulted his armourless, superhuman senses, sickly, invasive.

And he felt light. Superhuman. Like he could jump up, break open the sky with his hands and never come down.

He hadn't realised what a weight the armour had become, no matter the strength and invincibility it gave him in battle. He had become used to its burdensome weight, and the focusing muzzle it had put on his senses. In truth, he had not been out of armour for any real length of time in six years.

Six years. Six years ago, he had stood on this very deck, similarly robed and similarly cleansed. He had gazed out over the fortress of Karybdis and rejoiced. He had been Trooper-brother Priad, newly selected for Damocles by Sergeant Raphon and Apothecary Memnes.

Now he was back again. As Sergeant Priad, in Raphon's place. And Memnes too was dead.

Priad was painfully aware of the way honour had passed into his hands. He looked down at them, surprised to see them human and bare. It felt wrong that the great power claw wasn't clenching as he closed his hand.

He had held the squad together well since Raphon's death. They had enjoyed victories on Ceres and Eidon. But now he had to remake it. Almost a third of the squad had to be reselected and inducted.

Priad looked up at the stars, as he often did when in search of guidance, no matter what part of the galaxy he found himself in. He didn't know even half the names – that was the job of a librarian or an apothecary – but he usually found meaning in their display and formation. The God-Emperor of Mankind was in the stars, in every one of them, after all.

Directly above him was the tight band of the Reef Stars, a linear constellation to which Ithaka itself belonged. Though the Iron

Snakes travelled far and wide in the service of the Emperor, this cluster was their particular battleground. Since the start of Imperial time, the Chapter had policed the Reef Stars and kept them safe, especially against the influx of the dark eldar, their oldest enemy.

'Sometimes the great, old wyrms will submerge for years at a time,' said a low voice, 'but not so deep as your thoughts now, boy.'

Priad turned, and immediately dropped to his knees. There was a sudden, saintly odour of power and electrical machines.

'Chapter master!' he gasped, making the sign of the aquila.

'Get up, boy. The Emperor in his wisdom gave you sturdy legs, so use them.'

Priad rose slowly, his head down.

'Look at me, Priad.'

Priad gradually raised his head.

Chapter master Seydon was just a shadow; robed, mysterious and towering. His cloak was made of broken, polished wyrn-horn pieces linked together like a jigsaw puzzle by gold wire. Slow respiration throbbed from the exchanger tanks under his cloak. His head was cowled, but there was a suggestion of inner light coming from where his eyes should have been.

He was a good metre taller than Priad.

'Master...'

'There are many things an Iron Snake might be allowed to fear, boy. The massed legions of the archenem... the hordes of the greenpigs... the swarms of the accursed hives... but I am not one of them. Slow your pulse and your breathing, Priad. Be calm.'

'I had not expected to see you, lord.'

'I make it a point to see those Snakes who return after a long absence. Especially those I am fond of. Damocles squad – now, I've been fond of that ever since I told Damocles to form it. One of the finest war-squads this chapter has ever produced. Right up there with Thebes, Veii, Parthus and dear, brave Skypio. And you, Priad, you're Damocles now.'

'Yes, lord.'

'Petrok spoke well of you. On Eidon, you impressed him, and it takes a lot to impress my illustrious librarian.'

'I am not worthy, lord.'

'They tell me Memnes is dead. I will lament that in the temple. A great loss.'

'Lord.'

'Who else?'

'Calignes. Illyus.'

'Calignes... I always liked him. Had an air of old Pheus about him, the way he carried himself. Illyus... now he had the mark of a leader on him. Might have led a squad of his own, one day.'

Priad was quietly amazed. Though the Chapter numbered a thousand Marines, the chapter master spoke like he knew every one of them personally.

'You'll miss the men most in the long run,' said Seydon.

'Sir?'

'A great man like Memnes, everyone will mourn. That'll make the loss easier. But Calignes, Illyus... in my experience, a squad leader will miss the common troopers most. No one mourns them in quite the same way as a squad commander who misses their nuances and moves.'

'I'm sure, lord. But Memnes is a great loss to me.'

'Naturally. You've thought about a replacement?'

Priad nodded. 'I was bold, lord. I wanted an experienced man as apothecary. Khiron—'

'Not Khiron, boy. Forget about him. Khiron won't be joining a squad again.'

'Lord, I... I heard what happened on Cozan. All of Ridates Squad lost except for Khiron the apothecary. It surely wasn't his fault.'

Seydon turned and looked out across the moonscape.

'No, it wasn't. Men die in war, and Ridates Squad fell valiantly. Khiron was lucky to survive, and I know for fact he wishes he hadn't. I'd have liked to have him back in a squad quickly. But it is more recent events that bar him from consideration.'

'Lord?'

'Look elsewhere, Priad. Look to your heart. I know you'll make a good choice.'

'Thank you, lord. I will try, but...' Priad's voice trailed away.

As silent as a phantom, the ancient chapter master had gone.



BROTHER NATUS grunted and shifted his weight onto his left leg as the petitioner put his full force into the swing. The cnokoi he wielded whistled over Natus's right shoulder, and Natus pivoted around and brought his own staff up skilfully into the petitioner's rib cage, doubling him over and dropped him onto his backside on the straw mat.

Xander and Andromak laughed broadly and applauded. Natus grinned, and leaned over, reaching out with his augmented left arm to pull the gasping petitioner to his feet.

'Nice try,' Natus said, 'but your reach was wide and it left you open.'

'Sir,' the petitioner nodded, limping back to the edge of the mat where the other petitioners were waiting. At least three of them were sitting, nursing bruises and confusions.

Priad stood with Pindor, Kules and Scyllon on the far side of the sparring hall. Like all the Iron Snakes in the chamber – Damocles veterans and aspiring initiates alike – he wore a flexible bodyglove of dark grey hide, his feet, hands and head bare. The bodyglove was form-fitting, sculpted to the contours of the powerful physique beneath. Rubberised studs covered the lumps of cutaneous plugs and dermal implants.

Only Lexicanum Phrastus was robed. He wore a long grey euchoi of silk, edged with white and red beading and sat on a stone vaulting block, making notes on a data slate.

'Next man!' he called, flicking his fingers.

The next petitioner in line stepped onto the mat and picked up the discarded cnokoi. Two metres long and made of bronze, the cnokoi was a practice weapon designed to simulate the weight and balance of a sealance. There was no blade tip, but one end flared slightly into a blunt, spatulate flatness.

'Name?' asked Phrastus.

'Dyognes,' said the petitioner. He was tall and slender, his hair tied back behind the crown of his head in a short knot.

'Begin,' said the Lexicanum.

Natus settled into a casual crouch, legs planted wide, the classic laosrae or deck-stance that kept a man upright on a wake-rocked boat. He held his pole across his chest, upper tip angled out to deflect, lower pulled back ready to snap out an underhook from the waist when it was least expected. Dyognes, the petitioner, took up a similar but less stooped stance and they circled. He'll

soon be knocked off his feet, Priad thought, his centre of balance is too high.

Dyognes swung his pole tip down at Natus, who deflected it with his own raised tip, immediately pushing out the underhook in response. But Dyognes blocked the hook with a bell-like clang of metal, swept in with his upper tip and, as Natus parried that, deftly slid both his hands to one end of his cnokoi and hooked it like an oar behind Natus's knees.

Natus landed on the mat hard, his breath barked out of him. Now it was the petitioners' turn to clap. Andromak and Xander laughed again.

'Good,' said Natus grudgingly as the petitioner helped him up.

'Again?' asked Dyognes.

'My turn,' said Scyllon, stepping forward onto the mat and taking the cnokoi from Natus as he withdrew. Next to Priad himself, Scyllon had the best record of any in Damocles when it came to wyrm-hunting, and he was a master of lance-craft.

Priad wandered over to Phrastus's side as the bout began.

'Interesting,' said the Lexicanum. Dyognes was the first petitioner to have won a bout against the members of Damocles since the session had begun that morning.

Scyllon moved in without formality, barely seeming to prepare himself. He spun in with a flurry of blows, high and low, that had the younger man lurching back across the mat. The air rang with the strokes of bronze on bronze.

Just when it seemed he was going to be driven across the red out-of-bounds border around the edge of the mat, Dyognes rallied and threw a series of thrusting strikes that forced Scyllon to first duck and then back off. What marked the petitioner's ability particularly was his unorthodox style, Priad noticed. Dyognes frequently changed grip, so that many blows were readdressed and swiftly reversed, and he wasn't afraid to swing the cnokoi one-handed, increasing its reach.

Taking one hand off the staff in a bout was frowned upon, of course. Half as much grip... twice as much likelihood of having the weapon knocked from your grasp.

Dyognes blocked three expert thrusts from Scyllon, and then tore in with an underhook so well-timed Scyllon had to leap back to avoid having his ribs broken. But he was

wrong-footed. Dyognes drove on the advantage, scything his pole out one-handed to clout Scyllon around the head.

But Scyllon had feinted. He brought his pole up and intercepted Dyognes's wrist. The petitioner's crokoi went spinning away through the air. Scyllon then butted Dyognes in the chest with the tip of his pole and dropped him onto the mat.

There was general applause.

'Bout, Scyllon,' said Phrastus.

'No,' said Priad. The applause died down. Priad pointed to where Scyllon's left foot was squarely planted in the red border.

'Out of bounds. Bout, Dyognes.'

Scyllon cursed at his own error good-humouredly and helped Dyognes up.

'There's one,' said Priad to the Lexicanium. 'Mark him down.'



HE KILLED Brother Krates of Phocis Squad.' 'He what?' Priad snapped in disbelief. 'Lower your voice, brother. It's not a popular topic in the Chapter House these days. Khiron's disgrace has astonished everyone.'

Priad couldn't believe what he was hearing. He stood with his old friend, Brother-sergeant Strabo of Manes Squad, in the atrium of the Chapter House temple just at the end of twilight prayers. The columns of the portico rose above them, entwined with bas-relief wyrms. Priad was almost choking on the scents of the smouldering incense. His nose just wasn't used to such broad, unfiltered odours.

'Ridates, Phocis and Thebes were deployed on Cozan, so I heard,' Strabo whispered. 'The archenemy was there in force, protecting some foul shrine or other. Ridates squad were wiped out, except for Khiron, and Phocis took some casualties before Thebes managed to turn the day and destroy the foe. They shipped back here with the wounded.'

'And?'

'Two days after they got back, Khiron walked into the Apothecarium and put his boltgun to the head of Brother Krates, one of the wounded from Cozan. Just like that.'

'But... why?'

Strabo shrugged. 'They say Khiron claimed Krates was an instrument of the warp, and that he was protecting the Chapter. But there was no proof. It seems more likely that Khiron's mind had gone. The loss of his squad and everything. He's been locked away, raving, so I heard. There may be a trial, but more likely just... oethanar.'

Priad shook his head. It all seemed so unlikely. Khiron was one of the most level-headed and respected apothecaries in the Iron Snakes. To lose his mind...

'You wanted him to take Memnes's place?'

'Yes,' said Priad.

'I'd leave it alone, brother. Look elsewhere. Khiron is no longer of the phratry.'



AFTER THE evening bell and a brief break for nourishment, the routines of combat practice recommenced. Damocles squad returned to the sparring hall to put some more petitioners through their paces.

Dyognes was a certainty now in Priad's mind, and there had been two others with promise. Now, in the evening session, two more performed well, especially a thickset youth called Aekon.

Lexicanium Phrastus had also brought one of his suggestions for apothecary, a blunt, grey-haired man called Sykon. Priad didn't take to this Sykon much, thought it had less to do with the man's bearing and more to do with Priad's state of mind. Khiron was going round and round in his thoughts.

He'd known and admired Khiron since his own days a petitioner, and indeed had been intending to try for Ridates Squad when Raphon called him to Damocles. The selection to one of the Chapter's most prestigious squads had shocked and honoured him. Priad had not then recognised his own worth. Only afterwards did he discover that he was one of the top petitioners of his year and that several squad commanders had argued over him. Priad had been unusual in that he had not joined the Iron Snakes with any burning ambition for advancement. Many of the petitioners dreamed of induction into Skypio, or the Terminator elite. For Priad, it was enough just to be an Iron Snake. A place in one of the

standard tactical companies like Ridates would have been more than enough for him. In hindsight, he wondered if that very lack of ambition had got him to where he was. Perhaps the Chapter commanders noticed him because he had been more concerned with solid warcraft and service than on promotion or glory.

It was certainly what he had seen as appealing in Dyognes and Aekon. They came to the mat with none of the strutting bravura of others. And those others usually left the mat on their hands and knees.

Priad conducted the last few bouts of the session himself. He tried not to take out his exasperation on the poor fools who came up against him, fumbling with the crokoi like they'd never held one before. He tried to remind himself that every one of these men had taken at least one water-wurm single-handed. They were Ithaka's best. Priad left them gasping and spitting blood on the mat.

'That's it,' Priad called, and the group broke up. He handed the crokoi to one of the petitioners to return it to the wall rack. Phrastus came over.

'I don't think I have to ask...' the Lexicanum began.

'Unless you've got something better to show me tomorrow, sir, my choices are Dyognes and Aekon.'

'Good choices, I believe,' said Phrastus. 'At your word, I'll confirm the selection with Captain Phobor and then prepare the induction rites. They will be Damocles by the end of the month.'

He paused. 'About the apothecary. His induction should take place at the same time.'

'Let me meet both candidates here tomorrow at seven, and I'll give you my choice after that. Bring the inductees too - Dyognes and Aekon, and the others we have marked as possible. I'll review them all one last time to be sure.'

'There is still time tonight, brother-sergeant.'

'Tomorrow, sir, please.'



THE THOLOS lay beneath the Chapter House, founded deep in the rock crust of Karybdis. A punishment blockhouse it was, thanks to the meticulous discipline of the Chapter, seldom used. Its most common residents were prisoners of war, held pending interrogation under the watchful eyes of the archons.

Phybos, the night's duty-archon, was a grizzled veteran who had lost both legs and an arm on Kinzia five decades before. He wore a long, grey beard and tied back hair, and his augmetic carriage grumbled as it carried him down the cold stone passage.

'This is irregular, brother-sergeant,' he complained.

'But permitted?'

'Yes, I suppose. Do you have a reason?'

'Do I need one?'

'You're the leader of Damocles Squad, brother. No, you don't.' Phybos paused and tutted, shaking his head at something.

'Has he said much?'

'You're joking!' Phybos replied. He tutted again and yelled, 'Shut up, in the name of the Primarch!'

Priad frowned. He had heard nothing.

'He's raving, raving night and day,' Phybos said, moving on. 'You hear that?'

Priad couldn't.

'You won't get any sense. And don't get too close to him, either.'

Phybos stopped in front of a heavy bronze door and slowly unlocked it, using the chain of keys around his scraggly neck. The door swung open to reveal an inner cage door, and beyond that, a gloomy cell containing Apothecary Khiron.

'There,' said Phybos. 'Raving, like I said.'

Khiron wasn't raving. He was seated at the back of his cell, silent, staring out at the open door with intense eyes. His face was bruised and purple around the nose and cheek.

'Leave us,' Priad said.

'Don't be too long, brother,' Phybos answered, and trundled away.

'Priad.'

'Brother Khiron.'

'No brother now, I'm afraid,' said the older man. 'I am cast from the phratry.'

'Why did the archon say you were raving?' asked Priad, approaching the bars.

'Am I not raving? Am I not hurling abuse and torrents of blasphemy at the cage?'

'No.'

'I see. That's what most men think I'm doing.'

'Why?'

'Because th—' Khiron paused. 'It doesn't matter. I'm grateful you see men and not a deranged monster. But there's no point trying to explain it to you. It wouldn't do any good, and they'd just claim I was trying to deceive you.'

'I—' Priad began, but didn't really know what to say.

'Let me ask you a question,' said Khiron. 'Why have you come?'

'I couldn't believe the stories. I wanted to see for myself.'

'I'm a curiosity now, am I?'

Priad shook his head. 'I didn't mean it like that. Damocles lost Memnes on Ceres. I was hoping to induct you as a replacement. My choice has been... blocked.'

'Memnes... dead?' Real sadness clouded Khiron's wise, swollen face. 'Then we have both suffered our losses this season.'

'Ridates will be mourned. Brave brothers all.'

Khiron rose to his feet, but did not approach the bars. 'Crossfire. In a gully. Dead, all of them, in less than six minutes. Only some cruel chance spared me. Stray shots brought down the gully wall and I was buried in rubble. The impact broke my cheek and nasal bone, as you can see. The archenemy thought I was dead too.'

He fixed his stare on Priad. 'I wish I could have done more for them. More than just dig their progenoid glands out of their cooling bodies, one by one.'

'You did all you could.' Quietly, Priad was trying to goad Khiron. If the loss of his squad really had snapped his sanity, these raw questions might expose that and convince Priad. But Khiron remained calm.

'Have they decided on a trial?' Priad asked.

'No. I have asked for oethanar. It is set for two sunsets hence.'

Oethanar. Trial by wyrms. The worst fate a man of Ithaka could undergo. Left alone and unarmed on a stilt rock, he would face the wyrms as they were summoned. If he was alive at the end of six hours, his guilt was determined. The water-wyrms would not touch the tainted. If they took him, he was one of Ithaka's and his innocence would be celebrated in funeral songs and grief-rites.

'May they take you cleanly and quickly,' Priad said.

'Thank you, brother.'

Priad turned to leave and stopped. 'If you are facing oethanar anyway, tell me.'

'Tell you?'

'The truth of it as you know it.'

'The truth of it, eh?' Khiron sat down again. 'Aren't you afraid I'll taint your mind?'

'Just tell me.'

'A daemon, Priad. A thing of the warp. It was on Cozan, in the air, in the foliage, haunting us and directing the enemy beasts. It orchestrated the massacre of Ridates Squad. But it was a cowardly, feral thing. When Thebes Squad overran its minions, it fled and it hid.'

'Where?'

'Where? In Brother Krates. It was inside him when they brought him back, wounded. No one could see it. No one knew it was there. It blinded them all with its daemon glamour. But I knew it was there.'

'How?'

'I could smell it. I'd been close to it, remember. It had passed right by me after the massacre, believing me to be dead under that rockfall which smashed my face. I will not forget the smell.'

'What smell?'

Khiron looked up at the cell roof for inspiration. 'It has no equivalent. Once you smell it, you know it.'

'And that scent was on Krates?'

'Yes. It wasn't Krates any more. It was that thing, cackling and jubilant to have been brought inside the Chapter House, ready to strike at our heart. That's why I took my gun to poor Krates.'

'At least you can go to the wyrms knowing you stopped it.'

'No, Priad,' said Khiron, his face alarmingly serious. 'It's still here. I killed Krates but I didn't kill it. Like a fool, I used a gun instead of flames. It's moved on, into another host.'

Now Priad felt uneasy. This did seem like mad-talk to him. 'I haven't smelled anything.'

'Of course you haven't. It's gulled the whole Chapter House. But it's still here, because of that. Tricking you all.'

Phybos reappeared suddenly and slammed his baton against the bars. 'Cease your raving, scum!' he shouted, though Khiron's voice had been low and soft. The

old archon turned to Priad. 'Haven't you heard enough?'

'I think I have,' said Priad.



THE HALL OF the balneary was quiet and dark, lit only by the lamps along the inner kolonus. The main bath pool was fifty metres square and filled with sacred seawater imported from Ithaka itself.

Priad stripped off his bodyglove and dived into the water. He swam a lap or two hard and then floated on his back, looking up at the starlight filtering in through the circular window in the domed roof.

He suddenly realised he wasn't alone.

Above the soft lapping of pool water against stone, he could hear the feint pat of bare feet on the kolonus.

He waited for a call of greeting or a splash, but none came. After a minute or two, he folded at the waist and cartwheeled down under the water. Submarine noise roared in his ears. In the low light, he saw the legs of men moving through the pool towards him on all sides.

Priad surfaced. Six men surrounded him, standing where the pool was shallow enough, confidently treading water where it was deeper.

They were the surviving members of Phocis Squad.

'Priad of Damocles,' said one. 'You injure us.'

'I what?'

'We are wounded by Chaos and you take Chaos's side.'

'No! Why would you think that?'

'We know you spoke with Khiron,' growled another. 'That bastard is warp-scum! He slew Krates! He did a daemon's work!'

'Why would you show him pity and talk with him?' asked yet another.

'I showed him nothing. I wanted the truth.'

'The truth?' snarled a man to his right.

'You would scorn Phocis Squad so?' said the warrior next to him.

'Brothers... I have nothing but respect for Phocis Squad. Why have you come here like this? What is your intent?' Priad tensed. Inter-squad fighting was unheard of in the Iron Snakes, but he knew that in some rowdy

chapters, rivalry sometimes led to brawls between brothers.

Was Phocis honour so damaged they had turned on him now? At the least, this was intimidation.

'Speak!' Priad persisted. 'What is your intent, brothers?'

'Enough!' A strong voice echoed from the pool side. Priad squinted, and made out the tall shape of Captain Skander, leader of Phocis Squad.

'We've said what we needed to say,' Skander announced. 'Do not insult my squad again, Priad of vaunted Damocles.'

The members of Phocis withdrew, climbed out of the pool, and followed their commander out of the balneary.

Priad was left alone in the shadowy water.



◆ **I**T WAS JUST after seven, three hours after dawn bell. Priad had rested badly, his mind more troubled than ever. Now he stood in the centre ring of a combat mat in the sparring halls, a nokoi in his hands.

'Sir?' asked petitioner Aekon, edging out onto the mat to face him.

'Aekon?'

'You seemed to be elsewhere, sir.'

'As you where.'

Priad set the pole down and paused for a moment. On the mat next door, Xander was sparring with Dyognes. Near the arched doorway, Lexicanium Phrastus was introducing the apothecary candidates Sykon and Eibos to Andromak and Pindor.

Down away, down the length of the sparring halls, Priad could see Captain Skander leading the men of Phocis through hand-combat drill. Beyond them, Sergeant Strabo was conducting flamer practice with the men of Manes Squad.

Priad's superhuman senses could smell burning prometheum, sweat, furze and, from Phocis, the background taint of salt water from the pool the night before.

He had almost told Andromak and Pindor what had happened in the balneary, but didn't want to be responsible for a squad feud.

Shaking the thoughts off, Priad swung his nokoi up.

'Let's begin,' he told Aekon.

They exchanged a few, paltry pole-to-pole hits. Priad knew he could block everything the youth hooked at him.

'You'll have to do better,' Priad said, adopting the laosrae. His attention was caught by Captain Skander, yelling at one of his troopers while looking Priad's way.

Skander glowered.

'Sir?' Aekon asked, faltering.

'Let's begin, I said!' cried Priad and brought the bronze pole up at Aekon's face. The boy turned, and deflected Priad's follow up.

Priad circled again, and blocked with his cnokoi.

He glanced sideway and saw Skander was staring at him, as if he wanted Priad dead.

Priad fumbled.

Light and pain exploded behind his eyes. Taking advantage of the sergeant's momentary distraction, Aekon had struck him squarely across the nose with his cnokoi.

'Sir! Sir, I'm sorry!' he could hear the petitioner gabbling. 'I thought you'd block, I thought—'

Priad got up onto his knees, his head swimming. The boy had got a sound blow home. Priad's vision was fogged, and blood was pouring from his cracked nose, spattering across his chin and chest. There was a fuss of voices around him, and beyond them he could hear scornful cat-calls and jeers from the men of Phocis and Manes squads.

He put his hands to his face. His nose was broken, and his left cheek bone too. The blow would have crushed a normal human skull.

'It's all right, Aekon,' Priad slurred, spitting blood. 'It was my fault for not concentrating. You saw an opportunity and took it. I'd have been more offended if you'd pulled the blow. There's no room in Damocles for men who show quarter to the enemy.'

He got up, blinking tears out of his eyes, feeling the soft tissue of his face beginning to swell. Now he could smell nothing but the iron scent of blood, potent and stifling.

'Golden throne, brother! The boy's hurt you worse than all the scum on Eidon ever managed!' chuckled Andromak, steadyng his arm.

'Let me attend the wound,' said Sykon.

Priad shook them all off. 'Stop fussing over me like pack-mothers! Enough!' He could see better now and the self-sealing mechanisms of his augmented blood-vessels, along with the genetic clotting agents in his blood, were already staunching the flow. 'I'll go to the Apotheracion when this session is finished. Right now, Aekon and I were conducting a bout.'

He wiped his face with the back of his fist and left a smear of blood across his knuckles. Apart from the stink of blood, his sense of smell was registering nothing. Aekon's blow had probably damaged the olfactory augmetics too.

'Go, go!' he snapped, waving the anxious Aekon back to his starting place on the mat.

Blood. And more than blood.

Priad realised it suddenly. There was a smell, a strong scent behind the lingering dominance of his own blood. Sweet, yet stale. Soft, yet strong. It was...

It was like nothing he'd ever smelled before.

It has no equivalent. Once you smell it, you know it.

The smell of murder. Of obscenity. Of insanity. The smell of the warp.

'Brother-sergeant?' Aekon was staring at him, puzzled.

Priad ignored him, turning to scan the chamber. Close, so close by...

He could hear his own pulse beating in his temple like a drum.

Where? Where?

Priad started to move. To run. He left Aekon standing on the mat. Over his shoulder, he yelled, 'Damocles, form and cover, hades spread!' Stunned, reacting, the men of his squad broke from their bouts and conversations and leapt to follow him.

One bound took Priad onto the practice platform where Phocis squad was drilling. He shoulder-barged one of the men who had intimidated him in the balneary and sent him sprawling. Another half turned, and Priad elbowed him aside.

'Skander!' he bellowed.

Captain Skander's eyes were wide in surprise.

Priad's cnokoi smashed him to the floor.

Dazed, Skander had wit enough to roll as Priad's next blow clubbed down. The bronze pole made a dent in the wooden platform.

The men of Phocis howled in rage. One made to grab Priad, but he wheeled and smacked the man backwards with the flat of his practice lance. Two more moved in, but suddenly the rest of Damocles were there, striking out, grappling, covering their leader's back.

Damocles were all dressed for cnokoi drill in grey bodygloves, carrying the metal poles. Phocis were all in half-armour, exercising with small oukae batons and small bucklers. Priad's men had the advantage of reach and hitting power, but Phocis were much better protected.

Andromak and Scyllon laid in with their poles, breaking shields and forearm-guards. Natus smashed a baton from one man's hand and then caught him neatly on the chin with the head of his whirling pole. Xander, Kules and Pindor were wrestling with opponents of their own. One of Phocis cracked Natus hard across the clavicle with his baton and was about to do so again when Dyonnes dropped him with a cnokoi-flat to the forehead.

Priad's attention was entirely on Skander. The captain expertly kicked away Priad's footing, and they crashed together over the edge of the platform and into the practice area of Manes Squad. Priad could hear voices – Strabo's amongst them – shouting for them all to desist. Men from Manes put down their flamers and ran to try and break up the fight. Several found themselves drawn into it.

Priad would not desist. Struggling hand to hand with Skander, he was almost suffocating in the warp-stink oozing from the man.

Skander threw Priad over onto his back and heaved in with his oukae. The short hardwood pole shattered against Priad's cnokoi but Skander followed in with a savage kick that broke two of Priad's fingers and sent the pole skidding away across the decking.

Priad ducked back and threw a punch that cracked Skander's head sideways. Pain flared up Priad's arm from his broken fingers. Skander undercut and punched Priad in the throat and then broke the edge of his buckler across Priad's reeling head.

'Enough! In the name of the Primarch, enough!' Strabo screamed.

Breathing hard, Priad paused. For a moment, he wondered if he had indeed gone mad. Rage was pounding in his head. He glared at the bloody-faced Skander.

If this was all madness, then he would lose his command. Lose his place in the Chapter most likely.

Skander was raving at him, oaths and abuse. Priad couldn't smell the warp any more. He had made a fool of himself and disgraced the squad. He had –

He looked into Skander's eyes. There was something there. An after glow. A shadow. A corona of darkness around the pupils.

Like a fool, I used a gun instead of flames. It's moved on, into another host.

Priad stepped back and bumped into Strabo. His old friend was trying to hold him back and pin his arms. Priad wrenched free, and tore the flamer unit from Strabo's shoulder.

He swung back. Thumbed the toggle.

A cone of flame engulfed Captain Skander. He twisted and screamed as he was engulfed.

Alarms started ringing.

All the fighting had stopped. Damocles, Phocis and Manes alike, and all the petitioners, and the Lexicanum, stood in utter shock, staring at the collapsed human fireball.

And the man who had burned him.

'What... what in the God-Emperor's name have you done..?' Strabo stammered.

'Look,' said Priad weakly. 'Look.'

Something disengaged itself from Skander's burning corpse. A small thing, leathery, flapping smouldering bat-wings as if it hoped to fly away. It shimmered, like it was made of smoke. Its fingers were tendrils of articulated bone and it had nothing but a hundred blinking eyes for a face.

The sound it made chilled the souls of every one present.

'You see it?' asked Priad.

'Yes...' murmured Strabo.

'Good,' said Priad, and hosed the daemonizing with flame, annihilating it.



I SAW IT WITH my own eyes,' Lexicanum Phrastus was telling Captain Phobor. The veteran Iron Snake was glaring at Priad, who sat on the edge of the practice platform, dabbing at his nose.

'I thought Sergeant Priad had gone mad at fist, assaulting the captain like that,' Phrastus continued. 'But I saw it. A thing of the warp. A thing from inside Skander.'

'Priad!' growled Captain Phobor.

'Sir,' Priad said, getting to his feet. The men of Damocles fell in behind him, bruised and bloody-lipped from their brawling. Priad was impressed to see that Aekon and Dyognes took their place in the line.

'There will be questions, Priad. A lot of questions.'

'Sir.'

'But from what the worthy Lexicanium here says – and the other men besides – you may be exonerated. Praised even.'

'Sir. I hope that what has happened here might assist in the case of Khiron too.'

Phobor paused. 'It's too late for him.'

'Sir?'

At Captain Skander's personal request, Khiron was taken to Ithaka at first light. I'm sorry. Oethanar is already underway.'



THE SEAS AROUND the Primarch's Causeway were raging. White water marysae bloomed around the line of the stilt rocks, and fierce storm was rolling in from the ocean.

Retyarion. Wyrm-storm. The ferocious squalls that that seemed to follow the movement of the marine serpents. Soon, the seunenae, the folding walls of iron, would rise out in the deep waters and come crashing in, kilometres-high.

'I can't go in any closer!' the shuttle's pilot wailed. 'The wind shear will break us on the rocks!'

'Damn you!' Priad snarled. 'Lower then! Drop height!'

'You're mad!'

'Do it!'

'Look at the auspex, in the name of Seydon!' the co-pilot shouted above the noise of the wind and the rain. 'Hard returns, coming up from the depths! Krateyter!'

Priad saw the swirling green shapes on the scanner's dished screen. They were big. Perhaps not Krateyter, the giant bulls. But big. Three, four. Maybe five of them.

'Drop height!' Priad demanded again.

The shuttle's turbines shrieked as it came down over the water at less than ten metres. It was a hunting ketch, sleek and long-bodied, that Priad had virtually stolen from the Chapter House dock.

Priad scrambled back into the cargo bay where two lancing skiffs lay in hydraulic cradles. He ordered Scyllon, Xander and Kules into one, and leapt into the other himself. All of them were still clad in their grey bodygloves.

'Pindor! Andromak! With me! Natus... man the releases!'

Natus hurried to the aft position, pushing past the agitated and bemused petitioners Aekon and Dyognes. Priad wanted a good man at the release clamps. A clean clearance was a key part of a hunt run. And Natus knew that craft well.

Andromak caught Priad by the arm as he was unfastening the fore-tethers. The squad's standard bearer held out his right wrist. It was twisted, broken in the brawl.

'Stand out, brother, you're no use to me. You!' Priad pointed at Dyognes.

'Sir?'

'Can you hand lances?'

'Yes, sir!'

'Take his place!'

Dyognes helped Andromak out of the skiff and took his place midships, pulling the covers off the lances racked under the gunwales.

Priad looked up at Andromak, Aekon and Natus. 'Make sure our brothers don't fly clear away. We'll need extraction.'

'Sir!' the trio chorused.

A bell clattered.

'Drop height!' sang out Natus.

'Prepare!' ordered Priad. He dropped down on one knee in the prow of his skiff and looped his hands into the side ropes, pain throbbing from his broken fingers. Behind him, Dyognes did the same, and Pindor braced himself at the slim vessel's aft.

In the other boat, Scyllon, Xander and Kules duplicated the stances.

'Go!'

'Belly open!' cried Natus, raising his voice to yell over the engine noise and sea-thrash that boomed in through the opening hold doors.

'Hunt with the eye of the Primarch and the grace of the Emperor!' Natus yelled. With an experienced, unruffled eye, he watched the wind speed indicator and the shuttle's yaw.

'Brace, hold... now!'

Natus threw the release lever. The skiffs dropped out of the shuttle and fell towards the water.

Impact. A swirl of bubbles, and a rush of water noise. Priad held on as the skiff inverted, drowning them, and then slammed upright again as the thin, helium-filled buoyancy tanks self-righted them.

Kneeling at the back of the craft, Pindor cued the engines and they lurched forward, lifting out of the swell and skipping across the breaking waves like a flying fish. The slender nacelles containing the anti-grav plates extended out from the skiff's sides.

'Turn in! Turn in!' Priad yelled, his voice lost in the roar. But Pindor, at the helm, read his gesture.

Still crouched at the prow, Priad looked back at Dyognes.

'Draw a lance,' Priad said.

Dyognes crouched with his legs wide to ride out the buffets and slid a sealance from the rack. Two metres of polished bronze with a long spine of razor-sharp adamite projecting from the tip. He passed it deftly to Priad.

'Draw another and wait,' Priad said. He settled in the prow with the lance against his hip, the tip projecting out across the bows.

They circled in around Oullos Stilt, kissing the edge of the marysae that slammed up around the rock tower. Priad had ridden Retyarion before, worse than this. But it was gathering force. And the sky out to sea had gone a fulminous dark yellow. The iron waves were close.

'Around!' Priad cried, circling his fingers so his helmsman Pindor could see. The skiff took off left, bouncing through the incoming breakers, nacelles shuddering.

Priad looked aft. The other skiff was following them in, Scyllon at the bow with a lance in his hands, Xander behind him amidships ready to pass more lances forward, and Kules, sat low, at the helm.

'Wyrm-spore!' Dyognes yelled.

Dark, thrashing ulbrumid broke the water two hundred metres to their port side. Priad's hand clenched on the haft of his lance. He was no longer aware of the pain in his damaged hand.

The ulbrumid calmed and faded. A subsurface rising. They're down there, but not breaching yet, Priad thought.

'Auspex!' he yelled.

Dyognes was already on it, wiping flecks of spray from the screen. The auspex scanner was built into the deck just in front of the lance-giver's position in the middle of the boat.

'Deep! Two of them! One below at ninety metres!'

'Others?'

'Three more, out at a space of six hundred metres.' Dyognes adjusted the rangefinder's water-proof dials.

'And anoth- God-Emperor!'

Priad felt the lurch. He grabbed the side ropes automatically. Foam broke around them, an explosion of white water. He caught a glimpse of coiling horn plate sliding under them.

Dyognes had taken a mouthful of seawater. He coughed and spat.

'Sorry! Sorry! That one came from nowhere!'

Right underneath them. But it hadn't surfaced. They were still turning and rising.

'Left!' Priad indicated with his hands. Pindor swung them.

They passed objects floating in the water. Brontoie, the summoning-drums, automatic percussion buoys dropped by the shuttles that had brought Khiron down here at dawn. Their steady but erratic beating mimicked the sound of a struggling prey-item in the water and brought the wyrms in. One brontoie could bring a hunting wyrm from a thousand kilometres away.

Priad looked back. He saw his own shuttle hanging off near Splinter Rock, and another hunting ketch swooping down after them. It dropped its skiffs half a kilometre behind him.

Over the vox, Priad heard the battle-chant of Manes Squad. Brother Strabo had brought his men in to join the hunt.

The skiffs of Manes closed up, powering in, and all four vessels cut a wide crescent of white wake as they circled around Boethus Tower and the minor stacks that huddled nearby. Captain Phobor had told Priad that the oethanar duty ships had left Khiron on Lacles Stilt, a thirty metre high column right at the edge of the Primarch's Causeway.

Priad could see it now, a finger of rock rising from the white water. There were dozens of summoning drums in the water, beating out their enticing rhythms. Perhaps they were already too late.

'Wyrm! Wyrm sounding!' Dyognes hollered.

It came up out of the ocean fifty metres behind the squadron of hunting skiffs, pluming sheets of spray from the edges of its interlocking horny plates. Twenty metres out of the water, barely a third of its whole length. A maturing sub-adult. Its bone-armoured skull, the size of a dropship, opened to expose a white maw and articulate translucent fangs that were longer than a sealance. It called. The sub-sonic note blasted them with ultrasound. Then it writhed and fell back into the sea with the detonating force of an Earthshaker salvo. Tidal waves smashed out from its impact.

But Priad wasn't looking at it.

He was gazing ahead at Lacres Stilt. Ulbrumid was boiling at the base of the rock stack. And high up, on the flattened top, stood a lone figure.

Khiron.

The ulbrumid broke and a wyrm coiled up around Lacres Stilt. A mature female by its silvery plates, one hundred and forty metres long. Horn plates glistening, it wrapped around the rock pillar, rising. A second wyrm came up, a juvenile male eighty metres long. It locked around the female, writhing up around her, trying to constrict her into the rock with its coils.

The wyrms snapped and sounded at each other, snouts banging against snouts. The ultrasound of their calls percussively dimpled the sea swell, causing back-waves and eddies. The skiff wobbled, but Pindor steadied them, and curved them in.

Priad raised his lance and made the hand-down sign to Pindor that meant *slow*.

Ulbrumid boiled in the water ahead, rocking the skiff. In a surge of foam, the flat arrow-shape head of a wyrm broke the surface, jaws open. It was another juvenile, but big enough to swallow them whole.

Priad rose on the casting deck in the broad, braced stance of the laosrae and cast his lance. It tore into the beak-bone before falling away into the sea.

The wyrm broke the water and went down out of view.

'Draw me!' Priad cried.

Dyognes reached a fresh sealance into his waiting grip.

'Auspex?'

'It's running under us! Ten metres!'

'About! About!'

Pindor turned the skiff hard. Priad watched the water, braced, the lance ready. His arm was pulled back and the tip of the sealance was beside his ear.

The wyrm broke again, running the surface. Priad saw the horn-plates slicing through the chop as it slid under.

He cast again.

The sealance went right into the wyrm's side between the plates. The water went dark around them.

'Hold on!' Priad yelled, grabbing the side ropes.

The wyrm's death frenzy stormed the water into a chaos. They were lifted clean out of the sea by a blow from the writhing tail.

'On! On!' Priad cried.

Pindor pulled on the helm to correct and powered them out of the death-froth.

Priad looked back in time to see one of Strabos's skiffs thrown up out of the water and splintered to kindling by a mature female. He saw bodies flailing, falling. The wyrm lunged and took the lance caster out of the air like a feline snatching a dangled treat.

Hurling lances from his casting deck at the prow, Strabo turned his skiff back desperately to assist his wyrm-taken boat.

'Scyllon!' hissed Priad over the vox. 'In!'

'Aye!'

The two skiffs of Damocles ran in towards Lacres Stilt. Dyognes passed a fresh lance to Priad. There were three left in the other rack.

Priad looked up at Khiron, forlorn on the top of the stack. Below him, the mature female and the juvenile male were locked in mating combat, cracking the stone as their coils tightened. The smaller, fatter male bit its fangs deep into the female's back. In response, she shuddered and swung her sinuous head around, ripping out the male's throat with her vast blade-teeth.

Dead, the male collapsed back into the sea, its ropes of coil slackening. The weight of its impact threw up a swell that capsized both Damocles skiffs.

Priad spluttered as they righted. He was still holding the third lance.

The female had gone.

Priad looked about. There was no sign of her. Had the juvenile injured her so badly she had withdrawn?

Priad looked up at Khiron. The apothecary was standing at the lip of Lacer's Stilt, looking down.

He disappeared for a second and then reappeared, running.

Khiron threw himself off the stilt top and closed his body into a perfect diving shape. He hit the water like a missile.

A thirty-metre dive into marysae. Into white water. Not even the best... Priad thought.

'Brother-sergeant!' Dyognes called.

'What?'

'Hard return, six fathoms, rising...'

Priad scanned the water. There was a flash of foam. Khiron surfaced, spluttering and coughing, fifty metres ahead of them.

'Pindor! Swing us in!'

'Brother-sergeant!' Dyognes called again. 'Hard return! Huge echo, three fathoms astern!'

Priad looked back. He saw the ulbrumid. Saw the size of it. This wasn't the female returning. This was why the female had fled.

A mature male. A giant bull. Krateyer.

Priad leaned over the bow and grabbed the floundering Khiron by the arm. Struggling, he heaved the half-dead apothecary up over the gunwale. Scyllon's skiff closed in to assist.

The krateyer broke the surface behind them.

Even old Pindor cried out in alarm.

It was an old, old bull. A three hundred metre monster. Its girth matched the widest rock stack. Its huge skull was the size of a battle-bridge. It towered above them, cascading water from its ancient plates, opened its maw and exposed five metre long fangs.

It sounded. The surface water was blitzed into drizzle. Both crews fell down in agony, holding their ears. The hardwood casting deck of Priad's skiff cracked.

The bull surged forward, forepart raised out of the water. Scyllon threw a lance that bounced off the plate, and then snatched a fresh one from Xander.

He threw again.

It was a perfect cast.

The lance punctured between the third and fourth plates and lodged fast.

The old bull didn't even seem to feel it.

Priad dragged Khiron onto the casting deck and turned to pick up his lance. The vast wyrm was right on them.

Priad cast his lance hard.

It struck the bull's nose scales and quivered away.

'Draw me!' Priad yelled.

But Dyognes was leaning back to throw the next lance himself. Cursing, Priad stooped and pulled a fresh lance free from the rack.

Dyognes cast. The lance went clean into the bull wyrm's right eye. It shuddered and writhed back.

Priad had a lance by then. He cast it.

It went right down the wyrm's gaping throat.

As it fell, as it died, the bull wyrm blasted up vast wakes of water that smashed the skiffs aside and broke them on the stilts.

The plume of wyrm-blood spread and marked the water for a kilometre square. The hookbeaks and scale birds rioted down to feed in their thousands.



◆ THAKA. PROUD ITHAKA. Ocean world.

| Cradle of Snakes. The apothecary kneels in the surf on the beach as the moon rises between the stacks of the Primarch's Causeway. Waves break around his bulky armoured form. He fills the ten copper flasks with the lifewater of the homeworld.

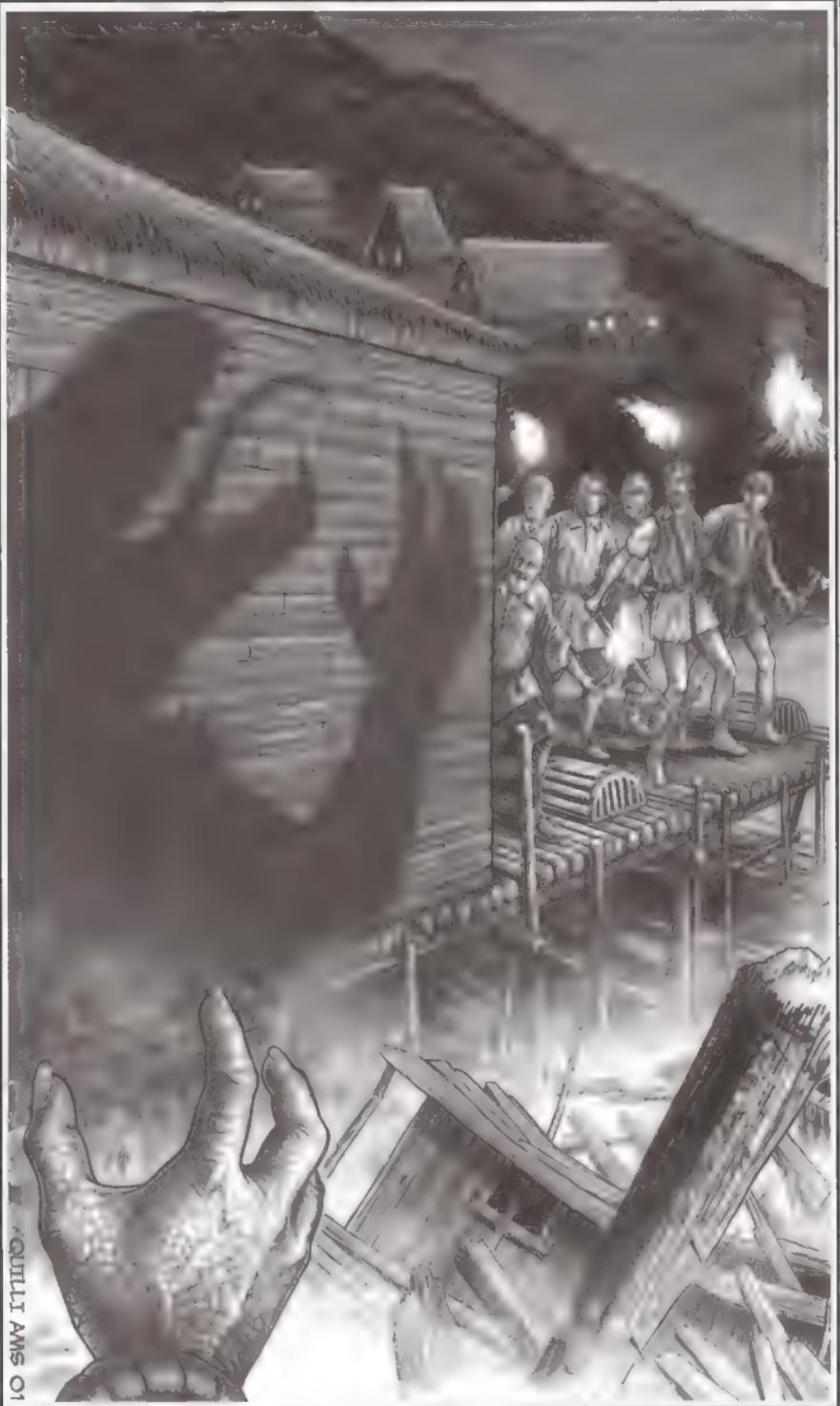
It is time to ship out. The battle-barge awaits to carry them to a distant war. This is the last act before leavetaking, the Rite of the Claiming of Water.

The apothecary intones the litany, and the men of Damocles squad, each one in full armour, circle around him at the waterline, making the ritual responses. He hands each one his flask of lifewater. The last two go to the newest inductees, standing proudly in their polished war-plate. Dyognes. Aekon.

The Rite is done. The Apothecary stands, screws up the stopper of his own flask, and slides it into his thigh pouch.

'Ready, brother-apothecary?' asks Priad.

'I'm ready, brother-sergeant,' says Khiron of Damocles.



AQUILLI AAMS 01

THE DOOM THAT CAME TO WULFHAFEN

by C.L. Werner

'IT IS TIME,' Gastoen said, his voice deep and commanding, brooking no question.

Karel rose from his bed, his head turning towards the open doorway of his room. Gastoen had already withdrawn, however, satisfied that his son would rise from his slumber and hurry to join his father outside.

Or, perhaps, thought Karel, his father knew that he had not been asleep. His body cried out from fatigue, the weariness of long hours spent before dawn hauling lobster pots and fishing nets from the chill waters of the Sea of Claws, a labour which had only ended late in the afternoon, as the small fleet of tiny fishing boats returned to Wulphafen, their occupants grumbling about the meagre catch. It was not yet late enough in the year for the lobsters to be numerous, and many of the pots went without an inmate, or yielded such miserable specimens that the clawed creatures were summarily tossed back into the sea. Still, the grumbling was not so very serious as it might have been amongst the fishermen of the many other coastal villages scattered across the Empire, for even if the lobster season was still months away, a far more profitable season was about to begin for the men of Wulphafen.

Karel quickly dressed himself, emerging from his tiny room into the much larger common room of his family's home. He could see his mother standing calmly in the centre of the room, a clay mug gripped firmly in her tired, wrinkled hands. She smiled at her son, a warm, loving expression, yet with the thread of worry mixed in to tarnish the reassurance the old woman hoped to bestow. When Karel stepped towards her, she gave him the clay mug, its contents steaming; he gratefully accepted the cup and sipped away at its contents. He was not surprised to find that she had mixed some rum into the tea. The alcohol would keep him warm far longer

than the tea. His mother was always so very practical.

'Your father is waiting,' the old woman gently prodded as Karel lingered over his tea. The youth nodded and slugged down the remainder in a single gulp, wiping the excess from his chin with the sleeve of his jerkin. Karel handed the mug back to the care of his mother's wrinkled hands and stooped downward to kiss her cheek. He was surprised when his mother tried to slip an object into his hands as he hugged her.

'What is this?' Karel asked, staring at the tarnished steel kitchen knife. His mother pushed his hands and the knife they gripped against his chest.

'You can never be too careful,' she explained. 'Slip it beneath your clothes. Better to have it and not need it, than to be without.' With those last words of warning, Karel's mother manoeuvred him to the door and into the cold night air.



KAREL FOUND his father leaning against the side of their hut, staring down the narrow lane that made up the village of Wulphafen. It was nothing much, as villages went. A scattered mass of simple huts, perhaps two score in total: a large wooden meeting hall, where the village men would spend long summer nights drinking and carousing; a mass of ramshackle boat houses closer to shore; a small warehouse where food would be stored, kept in a community trust; and a small coach house, the domain of Wulphafen's only wagon and four horses. Gastoen looked up as his boy joined him, smiling and gripping Karel firmly by the shoulder.

'Tonight you officially become a man,' Gastoen said, smiling into his son's face, his tobacco-stained teeth broken and pitted.

Gastoen stared at Karel, reading the youth's features. He thumped his son on the back and began to walk slowly down the lane.

'Everyone is nervous their first time,' Gastoen explained. 'You will do just fine. Why, when I was your age, I was probably even more anxious than you are now.' Gastoen punctuated his remark with a short, cough-like laugh.

Karel looked hard at his father, considering his words. He seemed older now than he had been only this morning, helping his son pull empty lobster pots back into their boat. Karel idly wondered if his father had also been unable to sleep, if he was having problems adjusting to the new nocturnal habit demanded by the long autumn nights. He would have thought that after these many years, his father would have adjusted to the yearly pattern. Perhaps it was something besides the alteration in routine that had upset his father.

'Are you certain that what we are doing is right?' Karel muttered, almost under his breath, as he pursued this last train of thought. Gastoen stopped, turning to face his son, both men, old and young, shrouded in the shadows of the huts to either side of the lane. Gastoen opened his mouth to speak but waited until a figure that had been advancing upon them from further down the lane passed them by, the last chords of the sea shanty the man had been whistling drifting away into the night. Only when the tune could no longer be heard did Gastoen speak.

'I myself asked that question of my father when I was your age,' Gastoen confessed. 'We stood, perhaps, in this very spot. He explained to me the way this wretched world of ours works. He said that in the sea, for the shark to grow big and strong, it must devour thousands of smaller fish. For the kraken, it must consume numberless whales to survive. As it is in the sea, so it is on land. For a man to prosper, he must have prey. It is the way of things, Karel. To have joy, yourself, another must suffer.' Gastoen sighed and put a gnarled hand on his son's head. 'Believe me, we have things much better here than in other places. If what we do brings us such prosperity, can what we do be wrong?'

The question seemed genuine to Karel, as if his father was not certain of the answer himself. The youth would have challenged his father's reasoning further when, suddenly, the shadows in the narrow lane danced away from them, retreating away from the beach. A bright light glared from the shore, dazzling in its brilliance, far more wondrous than the pale, feeble light of the tiny sliver of Mannslieb hanging in the night sky. Karel shut his eyes and flinched away from the sudden brightness, but Gastoen had already gripped the youth by the shoulder and pulled him into sharing the accelerated trot the old man had adopted.

'The beacon fire has been lit!' Gastoen exclaimed as the two made their way toward the shore. 'Our place is on the beach.' Gastoen paused as they passed the last of the thatch-roofed huts. He removed a heavy boat hook from his belt and pressed it into Karel's hands.

'Keep this ready,' Gastoen ordered, his voice heavy with concern. 'Stay close to me. Perhaps nothing will happen tonight, but as your grandfather always used to warn "expect every storm to be a hurricane".'



THE MEN OF Wulhfafen were gathered around a roaring, blazing fire. The mound of wood rose several feet above the rocks, promising to spend hours before burning out. Karel could make out the figure of Veytman, Wulhfafen's chief citizen, ordering men to stack the empty kegs of oil they had used to douse the wood with into an orderly file some distance from the advancing surf. Veytman spotted Gastoen and Karel as they advanced onto the sand and broke away from the bonfire crew to meet them.

'You are late, Gastoen,' Veytman reprimanded the older man. Thin and powerful where Gastoen was paunchy and frail, Veytman cut an imposing figure. The man's dark hair and rakish looks marked him out as the direct descendent of Wulhfafen's founder, the pirate Wulfaert. The narrow, elegant blade sheathed at Veytman's side was the finest steel in all the village and had been the pirate's when he

had plied the coasts of Bretonnia in his sloop The Cockerel. 'We should have been glad for your help in setting the bonfire.'

'I am sorry,' Gastoen began, trying not to meet Veytman's gaze.

'I see you brought your son along,' Veytman observed, focusing his cold blue eyes on Karel for the first time. Veytman studied the boy for a moment and they looked back at Gastoen. 'Are you certain that he is ready for this?'

This time Gastoen did not avoid Veytman's gaze. 'He will do what is expected of a man of Wulphafen,' the old man snapped, fire in his voice. Veytman nodded and clucked his tongue.

'We shall have to see about that,' the rogue said, running a smooth finger through the slight brush of moustache upon his lip. 'Just be certain that he knows the rules. No hiding anything. Everything that washes ashore must be valued and appraised before it can be distributed equally amongst the village.' Veytman let his face soften, and winked at Karel. 'Then, there is always the Captain's share to consider,' the man laughed.

'Do you think we will catch anything tonight?' Gastoen asked Veytman. Veytman turned, casting his eyes out to the darkness of the nighttime sea. There was motion there, the ceaseless undulation of the waters. But of what might be lurking above or below that undulating mass, there was no clue.

'No,' Veytman shook his head, 'it is early in the season yet. The fog is just now starting to become thick, the wind only now beginning to sound with Ulric's howl. I don't think that we will catch anything tonight. But it is useful to keep everybody in practice. We must let the indolence of summer be forgotten.' Veytman turned away from Gastoen and his son and walked over to the roaring fire, warming his hands before the flames.

'Come along, boy,' Gastoen said, gripping Karel by the shoulder. 'He has the right idea. It will be a long night, and we may as well be warm.'



'LIGHTS ON THE water,' the keen-eyed villager said. Karel was immediately roused from his napping by the sudden activity all around him. He looked away towards the roaring bonfire for a moment, then turned his gaze to Veytman. The rakish hetman of Wulphafen removed the long, slender tube of his looking glass from within the breast of his coat. Like his sword, it was an heirloom from the pirate Wulfaert, a rare and valuable device looted from an elven ship, if the legends of Wulfaert held any truth in them. Veytman placed the tube to his eye and gazed out at the black expanse of the sea.

'Fortune smiles upon us on our first night!' Veytman laughed, replacing the looking glass within his coat. 'She looks to be a merchantman, a fine prize for so early in the season!' Veytman looked over at a burly villager standing nearby.

'Emil, encourage our friends to come ashore,' Veytman said. Emil took the long, curved horn from his belt and put it to his lips. Soon, the man's bellows-like lungs sent a loud, mournful note echoing into the night. Gastoen and the other men of Wulphafen stared at the distant lights from the ship expectantly, even Karel becoming caught up in the excitement. The men watched and waited. When the lonely bellow of an answering horn sounded from the ship, the men of Wulphafen turned to one another, their wide, cruel smiles bespeaking their silent glee.

Karel watched as the lights of the ship came closer towards the shore. The youth understood what was happening, and his excitement abated as his mind made the leap from the scene he was witnessing and that which must surely follow. Emil blasted the horn once again as the ship drew still closer, drawn through the night and the fog towards the promising light of the beacon. Like a moth to the flame.

A captain wise in the ways of the north would never have fallen for the trick. The best charts of the northern coast of the Empire, that neglected, shunned region beyond the Wasteland and the Drakwald, described a craggy stretch of shore as Wrecker's Point. It is a place riddled with sharp fangs of rock, submerged shoals and razor-sharp coral reefs. The refuge promised by dozens of tiny harbours is like

the call of the siren, luring ships to their doom and no practised captain would accept their lethal charms. An experienced mariner would take his chances with the sea's doubtful mercy in even the most vicious storm than accept the certain destruction of a landing on the treacherous coastline of Wrecker's Point.

But the evils of geography are not the only dangers to menace the ships sailing the route between Erengard and Marienburg. A wicked place will often find wicked men all too willing to put to use such a blighted site. Several villages exist amongst the craggy rocks and fangs of the shoreline, tending their small fleets of fishing boats until Ulric's Howl, that terrible, chill wind which heralds the coming winter, brings a more profitable catch to their shores. But the best charts are expensive, and experienced captains in short supply. Far more numerous are the maps produced by cloistered scribes in the cartography shops of Altdorf and Nuln, drawn by men who have never seen the sea or heard the warnings of Wrecker's Point.

The ship continued, Emil and his counterpart on the vessel sounding their horns above the soft roar of the tide. It drew so close that Karel fancied that he could see the bonfire reflecting off the white canvas of the ship's sails. His young eyes tried to pierce the veil of night to ferret out the shape of the ship from the darkness that enshrouded it. A part of him wanted to look away, but he could not. It was not the fear that his elders would think him not ready to become a man that prevented him. It was because the drama was too compelling, too awful for Karel to turn from.

The sound of the ship striking the jagged fangs of rock that lurked just below the waters of the inlet tore the night asunder. It was like the bellow of some bestial god betrayed, a cry of pain and wrath. The cracking snap of the wooden hull as it split upon the rocks was the most horrible sound Karel had ever heard in his life, more terrible even than the cries and screams of the men onboard the ship that followed the death cry of their vessel. Karel focused upon the lights of the ship, trying again to pierce the veil, trying to see the conclusion of this terrible drama he was a part of. He could hear the screams; the cries of terror as

the black waters flooded the ruptured hull, as the sea reached up with its amorphous claws to pull the dying ship down to its watery grave.

Long minutes passed and the cries and screams faded away. The men upon the shore watched as the last of the ship's lingering lights was extinguished by the devouring waters and all sign of their victim was lost to their view. Veytman was the first to turn from the beach, striding toward the bonfire and putting flame to the torch in his hand.

'The first will be making shore any time,' Veytman said as the other men of Wulfhafen marched toward the beacon light and ignited their own torches. 'Break into pairs.' The descendant of Wulfaert let a cunning look enter his eyes. 'You all know what must be done.'

Gastoen handed Karel a lit torch, pressing the boy's fingers tightly about the firebrand's grip. 'You come along with me and Enghel.' Gastoen did not wait to see if his son would obey, but nodded to the grizzled, weather-beaten Enghel and the two men made their way away from the bonfire, holding their torches high to illuminate the incoming tide and the sandy beach.



KAREL WALKED several paces behind the two older men, his face pale and bloodless. He had heard the terrible shouts of discovery echoing from other searchers, only their blazing torches visible to his sight. He had heard the terrible screams that followed upon their findings, sometimes preceded by desperate, babbled pleas for mercy. Karel did his best to shut out the sounds of the drama's murderous epilogue, but try as he might, he could not block out the terrible sounds.

Ahead of him, Karel could see a dark object floating upon the white foam. Only when it was deposited upon the sand and rolled onto its back did he recognise the object as being a man. The youth ran towards the body that had come ashore. The ragged figure was tangled in a mass of weeds. Indeed, had he not seen the body wash ashore, Karel might never have noticed the

object for what it was. The boy hurried over to the brown mass of vegetation and found himself staring down at a dishevelled shape that had lately been a man.

Who he was, Karel had no way of knowing. Certainly he was no simple sailor, given the extravagance and finery of his clothes. There was a foreign look about him, a darkness of skin that instantly sent Karel's mind wandering to Tilea and Estalia, places that were nothing more than exotic fables to the simple people of Wulhfafen. Karel noticed the man's slender, patrician fingers, locked in a death grasp about a soggy, leather-bound book. Karel bent down towards the body and forced the cold fingers apart, relieving the body of the slender folio.

Karel opened the book, holding it upside down to allow some of the excess water to drool away. The ink had smeared and run in many places, but there was still enough that was intact for the boy to be astounded. The slender tome had been a sketchbook, it appeared, its pages crammed with fantastic drawings of strange creatures and impossible plants. Karel gasped as he saw a drawing of an ugly brutish creature with a warty hide and great horns protruding from its face. He saw weird things that were like bats with the heads and tails of serpents. Karel found that the last pages of the book were missing altogether, lost in the violence of the wreck, denying him the pleasure of whatever sights were depicted upon them. The boy found himself gazing again and again at the drawings. Where had this ship been to see such things? Had they truly been to the terrible Chaos Wastes he sometimes heard his father mention in hushed tones? Or had some other, even more distant shore been the focus of their journey? A wave of guilt swept over Karel. These men had gone so far, and survived so much, only to find their doom on the wasted shore of Wulhfafen, victims of a hideous deception.

The sigh that rose from the mound of weeds caused Karel to nearly leap from his skin. The youth cried out in fright before he saw what had so alarmed him. The man he had thought dead was staring at him, his eyes pleading for help, his slender hand reaching out towards him. Karel bent down towards the man, his hand reaching

downward to meet that grasping for him.

'Stand back, Karel,' Gastoen said, his voice strange and heavy. Both his father and Enghel were now looming over the survivor from the ship. Karel did as his father ordered and stepped away from the wounded man.

The youth watched in open-mouthed horror as Enghel crushed the survivor's arm with a savage downward swipe of his axe. The man's arm snapped, hanging limply at a twisted, unnatural angle. All the same, he struggled to raise it to ward off the second blow. He did not see Gastoen come upon him from the other side, a wooden belaying pin in his hands. Gastoen struck the passenger's head a brutal blow with the wooden cudgel, sending a rush of blood seeping from the man's scalp. Gastoen did not pause to see what effect his first attack had accomplished, but struck his victim's head again and again. After what seemed an eternity, Gastoen and Enghel withdrew from the pathetic, butchered thing that had once been a man.

Karel was frozen to the spot as his father walked over to him. His father reached out and took the boat hook from his son. The contact snapped Karel from his horrified stupor and the boy looked away from his father.

'You are tired,' Gastoen said, laying a hand slick with blood upon his son's shoulder. 'Hold the torches. Enghel and myself will attend to the body.' The old fisherman turned to the body of the murdered man, sinking the boat hook beneath the corpse's ribcage. Enghel followed Gastoen's lead, sinking a second hook into the body's ribcage. Wheezing from the effort, they began to drag the body back towards the bonfire. Karel followed after the grim procession, both men's torches held in his hands.

The boy's mind was in turmoil, reeling from the horror and barbarity of what he had witnessed. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the horrible scene upon the beach: the murdered man's eyes staring with terror at his father as Gastoen sent the belaying pin crashing against his skull. Karel could not believe that his father was capable of such actions. The same man who had raised him, the same man who had so tirelessly instructed him in the skills of a

fisherman, the same man who only the day before had jovially joked with him as they retrieved their lobster pots. How could such a man be capable of doing what he had seen him do? For most of his life, Karel had known what Wulhafen's trade was, but he had not understood what that trade really was until a few minutes ago. Now, more than ever, he thought about the virtue of such a trade, and was unable to reconcile himself to it. How had his father ever been able to embrace so cruel a vocation?



AS THEY MADE their way down towards the bonfire, Karel could make out the figures of men from the village drifting through the feeble light. He could see them linger before dark objects lying upon the beach, debris from the ship left stranded when the waters retreated back into the sea. Nearer, he could see Veytman and several others standing before a pile of barrels, clothing, and sacks. The men were laughing as Gastoen and Enghel hauled the body towards their position.

'What have we here?' the firm, authoritarian voice of Veytman made Karel stand straight, a look of guilt coming upon his face, as though he had been caught in some mischief. Veytman met the gaze of the men dragging the body. 'Ah, loot,' the hetman of Wulhafen declared. The hetman walked over as Gastoen and Enghel withdrew their boathooks from the carcass. Veytman stared at the corpse, then reached down towards him. The wrecker's fingers closed around a silver object dangling from the man's throat. With a savage yank, Veytman snapped the pendant's chain and tore it from the man's neck.

'My son found him,' Gastoen stated, looking over at his boy, favouring his son with one of the strange, curious gazes that he sometimes directed upon Karel.

'Congratulations, boy,' Veytman said. 'You have found the best plunder yet.' Veytman turned the pendant about in his hand, allowing the little light penetrating the fog to play across its surface. In shape, it was like a crescent moon, a thin, wisp-like tendril rising from the upward tip of the

crescent. Centred upon the crescent was a sphere or circle, as though Mannslieb had been impaled upon the wanling Morrslieb. Veytman did not know what the symbol might be, whether it was a talisman of good fortune, a badge of rank or office, or the charm of some foreign god. It did not matter him; it was made of silver, and that was enough for the descendant of a pirate.



HE NIGHT passed slowly, and the morning fog was thick upon the beach. In the aftermath of the night, most of

the men were gathered around the reduced flame of the bonfire, though a few still prowled the sands, looking for any plunder that might have escaped their notice the first time. Others were gathering broken planks and shards of deck or hull that had been cast ashore, intending to use the wood to bolster the frames of their homes and boathouses. Like the captain of a pirate vessel, Veytman made no move to aid the beachcombers. He stood with some of his closest cronies and examined what had already been collected, principally the salted meats contained within a waterlogged sack and the golden-hued rum within a slightly battered cask.

'We had best keep this away from Una,' Veytman joked as he tasted the rum. 'I don't fancy another night listening to Enghel's wife screaming at invisible goblins.' The comment brought laughs from all, and Veytman turned his attention to the salted meats, lifting a weird creature from the bag. Gastoen reached towards Veytman and took the strange salted carcass from the hetman's hands.

'Hopefully they were carrying something more useful than this,' Gastoen said, allowing the weariness to strain his voice. He turned the strange salted carcass in his hands, holding it by its tail. In size, it was akin to a squirrel, but in shape it was like a salamander. Altogether, Gastoen doubted if he would trust the thing's meat to a dog.

'The rum is good, anyway,' Veytman defended himself. 'And they had some very fine clothing, as well. In fact, Emil found himself a fine set of boots.'

'A wondrous haul,' Gastoen groused.

'There might be more to recover,' Veytman replied, already turning away from the old man and returning to his conversation with the other men.



HE SMALL FIRE continued to burn, fed by dry wood brought down from the village. Much of the kindling was wood salvaged from last season's victims. It was a cruel jest that the same timber should be employed to consume the first victims of the new season. The men of Wulphafen watched as the blaze devoured all traces of their prey, removing the last vestiges of their crime. It was rare, but not unknown, for a road warden or witch hunter to pass through the village and Veytman was taking no chances that the true nature of their livelihood might be discovered.

'Has everyone come back?' Veytman asked Emil, eager to get to the business of splitting up the loot.

'All except Claeis and Bernard,' replied the grim faced Emil, obviously disgusted by the smell of cooking flesh. There were things even a cutthroat could not get used to.

Veytman rolled his eyes and began to mutter a curse against the laziness of the men in question when, as if on cue, a horrified scream rang out from the beach. As one, the men withdrew from the pyre and ran towards the sound. The fog had still not entirely dispersed from the shore, yet it had thinned enough that Bernard could be seen, kneeling in the sand, staring at the sea and sobbing hysterically. Veytman was the first to reach the terrified man.

'Get a hold of yourself,' Veytman snarled, grasping the front of Bernard's shirt and shaking him roughly.

'What happened?' Gastoen asked, his voice more calm and even than Veytman's savage tone. Bernard turned his face towards the sound of Gastoen's voice.

'Claeis... Claeis,' was all the man could stutter.

'What about Claeis?' snapped Veytman, pulling Bernard to his feet. 'Where is that idiot brother of yours?' Veytman slapped

Bernard with his open hand, trying to beat sense back into the frightened man.

'Gone!' Bernard shrieked. 'A daemon rose from the sea and grabbed Claeis in its claws! It dragged him screaming into the sea!'

The men of Wulphafen cast apprehensive looks about them and fear began to crawl across their faces as they heard Bernard's frightened tale. Only Veytman was unperturbed. Far from fear, the hetman broke out into laughter.

'You expect me to believe that?' Veytman buried his fist in Bernard's belly, knocking the man to his knees. 'A daemon, eh? A savage kick to Bernard's face sent the man sprawling. 'You and your brother must have found something very choice to concoct that ridiculous tale!' Veytman sent another booted kick into Bernard's ribs.

'I tell you, we were searching the beach and a huge daemon rose from the fog and grabbed my brother!' Bernard shrieked. Another brutal kick silenced the man. The men of Wulphafen watched as their leader turned away from the unconscious Bernard, uncertain what to make of the situation.

'Two of you drag this thief to the meeting hall,' Veytman ordered. 'And keep him there,' he snarled as an afterthought. 'The rest of you try to find his idiot brother. I won't stand for any man trying to cheat this village of what it has earned!' The gathered men began to break away into small groups to search for the missing Claeis.

It was with great reluctance that Karel joined his father and Enghel in the search. Despite Veytman's contempt for the story Bernard had told, despite the hetman's claim that this was nothing but a plan to cheat the people of Wulphafen, the boy was not so very sure that something had not in fact risen from the sea and taken Claeis. More than ever before, Karel understood that Wulphafen was an evil place and that perhaps the Darkness had at last reached out to claim its own.



THE SEARCH was called off after only a few hours. There was no sign of Bernard's missing brother, but neither was there any trace of the sea daemon that had supposedly made off with the man. A furious Veytman had returned to the meeting hall, a murderous look in his eyes. He was quite vocal in his determination to beat the whereabouts of Claeis and the hidden plunder from Bernard and it was not too long after Veytman had entered the structure that the first screams of agony sang out across Wulfhafen.

The other men returned to their homes for the most part, although a few chose to watch the proceedings in the meeting hall. Some, no doubt, did so out of sheer sadistic urges, but Gastoen privately wondered how many did so because they harboured doubts about the honesty of their hetman and desired to be present to hear for themselves what Bernard had to say.

Gastoen and Karel returned to their home, Karel's mother already preparing a stew from one of the lobsters they had captured the day before. Karel, for his part, fell asleep awaiting the preparation of the food, slumping down in his chair. Gastoen smiled, knowing how little sleep the youth had had over the last few days, excited about his trial of manhood. Gastoen rose from his chair, prepared to rouse his boy and usher him to the greater comfort of his bed when he noticed the soggy, leather-bound book tumble to the floor from its resting place within Karel's shirt. Curious, Gastoen picked up the book and returned to his chair.

It was nearing dusk when Gastoen finished his examination of the book. He had scanned every page, trying in vain to decipher the smeared script, a task his own feeble reading skills were not equal to. The drawings were in better shape, and Gastoen gazed at them with a thrill of wonder he had not felt since he himself was a young boy. He stared at the strange pictures, likening them to a curious creature he had once seen in a Marienburg shop: a beast the shop owner had called a lizard, claiming it came from far off Araby. Gastoen could discern no scale for the animals depicted in the drawings, but he could not shake the feeling that the subjects of these pictures were massive, resembling the lizard he had seen in the same way an ogre resembled a man. It

was not until he saw the strange plants that a frightful thought occurred to Gastoen. The fisherman and ship wrecker shook his son back into awareness.

'Come along, Karel,' Gastoen said, rising from his chair once again and grabbing his hat from its peg beside the door. 'We are going over to the meeting hall.'



BERNARD'S SCREAMS had long since stopped. As Gastoen and Karel entered the large building, its floor composed of looted deck planks, they could see their former neighbour lying hunched in one corner of the main room. The man was unconscious, his chest barely rising. One of his eyes was a darkened hole, the flesh about the burned socket blackened and charred.

'He didn't say anything,' Veytman said when he noticed Gastoen enter. Emil and a half dozen other men stood near the hetman, drinking some of the gold coloured rum. 'He stuck to that idiotic daemon tale of his.' Veytman paused and took a deep swallow from his own leather mug. 'We'll try again when he comes around.'

'I want you to see something,' Gastoen said, walking towards Veytman, the book in his hands. Gastoen opened the volume to a page he had marked and showed it to the hetman.

'Do you see this?' Gastoen asked, pointing to one of the drawings. Veytman glanced at the picture of a strange looking plant and shrugged his shoulders. A few of the other men gathered around to see what was being discussed, staring at the book from over Gastoen's shoulders.

'What am I supposed to see in that?' Veytman sighed, taking another pull from his mug.

'We found a plant just like that washed ashore,' Gastoen answered, one of the other villagers nodding his head in affirmation.

'So? Is it valuable?' Veytman remained confused. Gastoen turned the pages to where the drawings of the animals were.

'Don't you see? If they had some of the plants in this book on the ship, perhaps they also had some of the animals,'

Gastoen's voice was on edge, frustrated that he was not getting through to Veytman. Before he could press the point and try to remove the look of confusion in Veytman's eyes, the door of the meeting hall again opened.

'The daemon!' wailed the grizzled, toothless face of Una, the wife of Enghel. The woman closed upon Veytman, beating on the hetman's chest and wailing hysterically. 'A sea daemon, as big as a house! It rose out of the fog and killed my husband!'

Every man in the room except Gastoen, Karel and the unconscious Bernard broke into laughter. One of the men grabbed Una and pulled her off of Veytman.

'Enghel should not have told you about that,' laughed Emil. 'You see enough monsters in your cups without him providing you with more.'

'I shall have to see if all of the rum is accounted for,' joked Veytman, draining his mug.

'I tell you, a sea daemon killed my husband!' the woman shrieked again in protest. A fresh round of laughter broke out.

'As big as a house?' mocked Emil. 'I remember the time you said there was a wolf living in your boathouse and all we found was a marmot! This daemon of yours is probably just a big ship's rat and Enghel is sitting in his home right now with a bitten finger!'

Una began a fresh tirade of shrieks and curses causing Veytman to look across the room at Emil.

'Better go and have a look at it, just to shut her up,' the hetman declared. Emil stomped across the room and gathered up a wicker lobster trap. He marched toward the door but paused on the threshold to stab a finger at the sobbing woman.

'When I catch this damn thing, whatever it turns out to be, I am going to make you eat it, you wailing harpy,' the man warned. With that, he was lost to the growing shadows in the lane outside.



IT WAS ABOUT fifteen minutes later when the door of the meeting hall opened again. The pale, drained figure that entered bore little resemblance to the jovial, half-drunk Emil they had last seen. The ship wrecker dragged the lobster trap across the room, dropping it midway. A stunned silence gripped everyone in the room, even Una, as the apparition crossed to the elaborate weapons rack that rested against one wall. Looted from the countless ships that had smashed upon the reef and rocks, the armoury of Wulphafen was a haphazard, but impressive affair. As Emil strode to the weapons, the others in the room could see the huge, gaping wound in the man's back, as though the flesh had been peeled away, leaving the wet muscles to glisten nakedly.

'We're going to need bigger traps,' he stammered before staggering for a moment, then falling to the floor.

That life had remained in Emil for so long that he had been able to walk as far as the meetinghouse had been a testament to the hardened shipwrecker's brutal vitality.

'Sound the alarm!' ordered Veytman, the hetman being the first to shake himself from his shock. The command brought a fresh wail of terror from Una, but one of the men hurried to set the alarm bell ringing. Veytman scrambled over to the weapons rack so recently visited by Emil and began handing some of the carefully hoarded armaments to those men in the room. Even the choice armaments, like the heavy Bretonnian broadsword and the finely crafted battle axe that one visitor to Wulphafen had sworn was dwarf-made were doled out. Now seemed to be no time to hoard the more elegant weapons.

'What good are these against a daemon?' protested a wide-eyed fisherman as he was handed a spiked mace.

'It is no daemon!' declared Gastoen, pushing his way to the front of the group. Already men were rushing into the meeting hall, summoned by the alarm bell. Gastoen raised his voice for the benefit of the men who had just arrived. 'It is some strange beast from whatever foreign shore that ship visited!' Gastoen repeated, trying to calm the superstitious dread slinking into the mob.

'Alright,' Veytman snarled. 'Everyone arm themselves, every third man get a torch, and let us see what manner of beast has chosen to die in Wulphafen!'



HE MOB WAS strangely silent, for all of its numbers, as every able bodied man in Wulphafen crept through the darkened lane, creeping like a band of thieves toward the all too near row of boathouses and fishing shacks. The fog hung thick about the village, clogging the streets with a misty grey shroud that the torches could pierce only partially. The men kept close to one another and even Veytman could not bring himself to enforce his earlier command that the men break up into teams of five. The sound of the surf striking the beach grew louder as the men pressed on, ignoring the fearful visages that peered at them from behind the windows of the huts they passed.

At last they reached the site where the long row of boathouses and shacks had once stood. The ramshackle structures were in a shambles, looking for all the world like victims of a hurricane. But no gale had blown upon Wulphafen, for the fog lay thick and unmoving all about them. A strange sense of dread fell upon the armed mob. Veytman and a few of the braver villagers crept towards the nearest of the shacks, staring with horror at the gaping wounds torn into the wood, bespeaking tremendous strength and lengthy claws. In hushed tones, the men discussed the ruin, concluding that whatever had dealt such damage was no such creature as they had ever heard of. Once again, Gastoен said that it was some weird creature captured by the crew of the lost ship.

As the talk continued, more and more men stalked forward, deciding that if Veytman and the others could linger for so long amidst the devastation, then it must be relatively safe. The men spread out, slightly, examining the destroyed boathouse next to the shack. One of the men at once came running back, his hand smeared red with blood.

'It must be from Enghel or Emil,' Gastoен gasped. He rallied several men to his side and ran towards the boathouse. Veytman was quick to follow the older man's lead, bringing the bulk of the mob with him.

A ghastly sight greeted Gastoен's group as they rounded the corner of the partially collapsed boathouse. Looming out of the fog, only a few feet away, was an immense shape of scaly grey and black flesh. The man to Gastoен's right let out a cry of horror as he saw the massive scaly back and tail revealed in the flickering torchlight. The creature turned around slowly, facing the crowd just as Veytman and his followers rounded the corner.

It was huge, easily twice the size of a man. Because it had been hunched the beast's head had not been visible over the boathouse. Now it rose to its full height, towering over the structure. Indeed, Una had not exaggerated when she said the monster was as big as a house. In shape it was roughly like a man, though only roughly. Its entire body was covered in grey scales, which faded to white as they came to its belly. Stripes of black, thicker scales criss-crossed its back and shoulders. The head was also scaled, a brutish snout protruding from a thick skull. Dangling from the monster's powerful jaws was the body of Enghel, his head completely within the creature's mouth. Yellow, snake-like eyes gazed indifferently at the mob while thick, muscular arms swayed indolently from the monster's broad shoulders. The reptilian horror worked its lower jaw and the skull of Enghel cracked like a walnut, the loud snap echoing into the night.



HE SIGHT OF the fiend so casually feeding on one of their own snapped some of the men out of their horrified daze. One bold fisherman lunged at the monster with a boat hook, the makeshift polearm sinking into the thick flesh of the monster's shoulder. Another lashed at the creature with a broadsword taken from the armoury, cringing back in fright as the weapon impacted harmlessly against the thick scaly flesh of the brute's leg.

The monster was slow to react. At first it just stared stupidly into the night. Then its lower jaw opened, letting Enghel's body drop to the ground. A thin, purple tongue whipped out of the scaly mouth, flickering in the air for a moment before withdrawing. Then, the seemingly lethargic beast became a blur of carnage.

A huge clawed hand dropped down upon the man who had so ineffectually struck at the creature's leg, the blow crushing the man's collar bone and battering him into a heap of broken bones, a twisted pile of meat recognisable as human only by the screams it still cried. The brute spun about, his powerful tail slamming into the villager with the boathook, knocking him some fifty feet away. The man landed in a crumpled pile on the beach, his head lying at an unnatural angle on its snapped neck. The beast paused, focusing its beady eyes upon the main body of Wulphafen's defenders. It opened its jaws and from deep within its massive form came a grunt-like bellow that had several men dropping their weapons to shield their ears from the sound.

Before the mob could react, the monster was in their midst, lashing out with its powerful claws and snapping jaws. Swords and axes struck again and again at the brutish reptilian abomination, more often than not failing to sink into the tough leathery hide. The few wounds that did draw blood from the beast seemed to go unnoticed, as the monster continued to deal death and mutilation to his would-be killers. In that same amount of time, the monster had killed or maimed over a dozen men, their dead or broken bodies lying strewn across the beach.

Veytman swiped at the huge beast with his elegant blade. The finest sword in the entire village impacted against the scaly flesh, sinking deep into the reptile's thigh. The brute turned, swiping at Veytman. The hetman dodged the crude attack, but the combination of his manoeuvre and the monster's assault snapped the steel blade. Veytman stared in horror at the broken sword, and the three inches of steel sticking out from the beast's leg, the creature seemingly oblivious to the injury.

It did not take long for the struggle to become a rout. Nor did it seem that the monster was content to allow its attackers to escape. Bellowing its awful roar once again, the huge scaly giant lumbered after the fleeing men, pursuing them into the village. Despite its bulk, the beast was unbelievably fast. Only the fact that it caught some of the slowest early on and stopped to reduce them to mangled piles of meat gave any of the villagers a chance to reach the supposed safety of Wulphafen's buildings. The feeble structures did nothing to stop the reptile's rampage, however. As the grotesque creature entered the narrow lane, it turned to face the first of the mud and wood huts. The beast's tongue flickered from its mouth, tasting the air, sensing the people cowering inside. The beast bellowed again, battering the wall of the hut with its immense bulk. Two hits were enough to collapse the wall and bring the thatch roof crashing down upon the inmates of the building. The monster paused for a moment, staring stupidly at the destruction it had caused. Then its eyes detected the squirming forms struggling to emerge from the ruins. The beast descended upon the rubble and screams again filled the night.

Gastoen and Karel remained with Veytman throughout the terrified retreat, following their hetman into the more solidly constructed common house. The woman Una gave a cry of alarm as the enraged men entered the meeting hall. A withering glare from Veytman silenced the half-soused biddy.

'It is a daemon!' sobbed Gastoen. 'It has come to punish us for our evil ways!' Veytman ignored the incoherent ramblings and made his way to the stack of tiny kegs piled beside the now empty weapons rack. The hetman lifted one of the kegs removing its stopper. Normally employed to light the evil beacon fires, Veytman now had a very different purpose in mind for Wulphafen's supply of lantern oil.

'Beast or daemon, I am going to send that thing back to hell!' Veytman growled.

'You cannot kill it! It has been sent by Manann to punish this town for preying upon the sea! No one can defy the judgement of the gods!' Gastoen broke into a trill of mad cackling, his mind crumbling

under the years of guilt that now fuelled his terror.

'Karel,' Veytman snapped, ignoring the boy's mad father. 'Help me with this! Grab that torch and follow me! Tonight we will see what kind of man you are!'

Karel withdrew his arms from his father's shoulders and raced to remove the torch the hetman had indicated from its wall sconce. The two men hurried toward the door, determined to put an end to the sounds of death and destruction rising from the street outside, vowing to find the monster preying upon their village and destroy it.

They did not need to find the beast, however. The beast found them.

The front door of the meeting house burst inwards, as if a fully laden wagon had crashed into it. Splintered wood flew in all directions, the shrapnel opening a gash in Karel's cheek. The great grey and black hulk lowered its head and slithered through the gaping hole in the wall. Once inside, the hissing beast rose to its full height, seemingly oblivious to the dozens of wounds bleeding all over its body. The head of the dwarf axe was buried deep in the creature's back, and still it showed no sign of injury. The monstrous brute let its head oscillate from side to side, surveying the room with its reptilian eyes, tasting the air with its slender purple tongue. Then the mighty beast roared, the tremendous sound deafening within the close confines of the room.

The effect was immediate. Una shrieked again, scrambling for the rear door of the meeting hall, disappearing through the portal with a speed and agility that should have been impossible for a woman of her age and health. Roused from his pain-filled slumber, Bernard focused his remaining eye upon the hideous reptile. At once, the man was crawling across the floor, hurrying after the departed Una. The creature made to pursue the fleeing wretch, but a much closer victim gave the enraged brute pause.

Karel could not hear what his father was saying, his ears still ringing with the monster's mighty roar. Gastoen had run forward as the beast broke into the meeting hall and had fallen to his knees before the hulking brute. To Karel, it appeared that the man was actually praying to the huge

reptile, a look of insane rapture on Gastoen's wizened face. The creature looked down at the figure bowed down before its knees. The great brute brought one of its enormous clawed fists crashing down into Gastoen's head, the force of the blow making the man's skull and neck sink between his shoulders. Barely ten feet away, Karel watched as his father expired, as his world was rent asunder. The man he had loved, respected and admired was no more. The man he had looked up to all his life had been taken from him in one instant of madness and carnage.

Karel gave voice to an almost inhuman cry of rage and loss and charged the huge beast, the knife his mother had pressed upon him gripped firmly in his hand. The knife impacted harmlessly against the reptile's leg. With an almost dismissive gesture, the hulking brute swatted Karel with the back of its hand, sending the boy flying across the hall. He landed against the far wall, the wind knocked from his lungs. The boy dropped to the floor, groaning the mixture of anguish and agony that wracked his form.

Veytman yelled in fury and ran at the huge monster. The hetman hurled the keg of oil at the beast with his left hand. The object flew lethargically across the room, missing its intended target and breaking apart against the wall behind the creature. The failure of the missile to strike its target did nothing to stop Veytman's attack. The man lashed out at the huge beast with the torch he held, thrusting the flame upward into the monster's face.

The creature hissed angrily, flinching away from the flame. Veytman cackled triumphantly, pressing his attack. But he grew too bold, too certain of the beast's fear. The reptile bellowed again and lashed out with a massive clawed hand. The claws tore through Veytman's stomach, ripping his intestines from his body. A river of blood fountained out of Veytman's butchered flesh, sickly yellow stomach matter staining the crimson cataract. Veytman fell to his knees, blood filling his mouth. The last sight his dying eyes focused upon was that of his own innards dangling from the creature's claws.

As Veytman died, the torch fell from his nerveless fingers, rolling across the floor to meet the spilt oil. Even as the lizardman stomped toward Karel, the flammable liquid caught fire, turning the entire wall into a fiery blaze. The monster turned away from the youth, staring with fear at the blaze behind it, croaking its own terror.

Karel had only moments to act, seconds to overcome the fear gripping his frame, the pain wracking his body. It was a moment to transform a boy into a man. Karel turned towards the rest of the supply of Wulfhafen's oil, smashing the stoppers from the kegs with the end of the knife still clutched in his hand, pitching the ruptured contents to the ground. The incendiary liquid splashed across the floor, rushing to meet the flames on the other side of the room. The creature turned, perhaps sensing what the boy had done, or perhaps merely looking for another way to leave the building. Whatever its purpose, Karel did not wait to find out. Hurling the torch at the pool of oil gathered about the reptile's feet, the young man leapt through the rear door of the common house.

The oil ignited at once, transforming the meeting hall into an inferno. The monster tried to flee from the flames all around it, its primitive brain taking long minutes to realise that its own flesh was on fire. The lizardman's bellows of agony rose from the blaze as the fire seared its scaly flesh.

Outside, the survivors of Wulfhafen emerged from the shelter of their homes; gathering about their burning common house, watching the consuming flames lick into the night sky. The huge beast trapped inside was a long time in dying, its anguished cries ringing into the night for nearly a quarter of an hour. The crowd remained through it all, silent and stunned. There was no sense of triumph in the people of Wulfhafen as the flames consumed the horror that had descended upon their tiny village. Survivors they may be; victors they were not.



KAREL GATHERED the last of his possessions together and kissed his mother one final time. The morning sun had barely peaked above the horizon; the first birds were only just emerging from their nocturnal sanctuaries. Karel shouldered his pack and made to leave the only home he had ever known. He could almost see Gastoen again, sitting at the table, his weathered, cracked hands resting in a cool bowl of fresh water, trying to soothe the pain from his tortuous labours on the sea. He could almost see his father making ready to join the ship wreckers, with all the guilt and shame that had shrouded the evil things he had done to support those he loved. Karel could now understand the strange and frightened looks his father had sometimes favoured him with. It had been the closest Gastoen had ever come to voicing his truest fear, the fear that his son would become himself one day, that the dark practice of Wulfhafen would live on through his own blood.

'Where will you go?' his mother demanded, trying to fight back her tears. Karel paused and caressed her tired, worn hand.

'I am going to go down to Marienburg,' Karel declared, looking away from his mother for fear that tears would well up in his own eyes. 'I shall go to the temple of the sea god, see if the priesthood of Manann will have me for one of their own. See if they will allow me to atone for the crimes of my fathers, and my home.'

Karel kissed her again, and stepped out into the narrow lane that wended its way through what was left of Wulfhafen.

Perhaps the village would fade away now. Perhaps it would somehow rebuild and endure. Perhaps it would even return to its evil ways. For Karel, it did not matter. He had found the answer to the questions he had asked his father. The beast had not been a daemon, but could it truly be said that it had not been sent by the gods? Had the terrible doom that visited the village not been brought about by their own avarice and greed? Karel could not lead any of his family or neighbours to atone for their misdeeds, for each man was steward of his own soul.

So, the last son of Wulfhafen strode away into the morning light, taking the first steps on the long road of his penance. 



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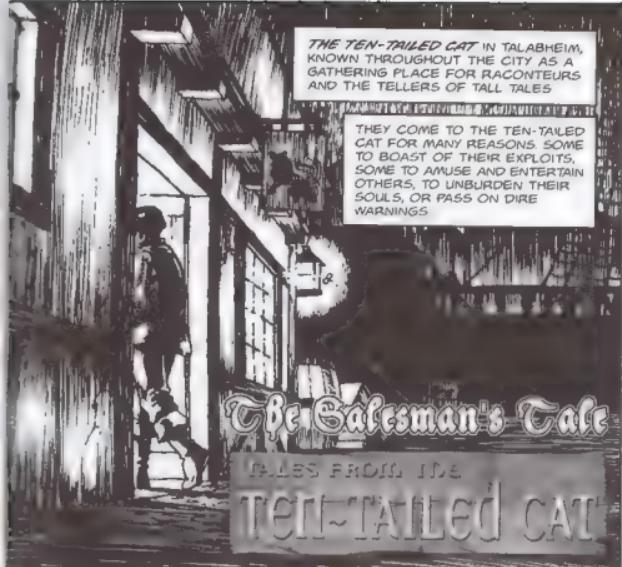
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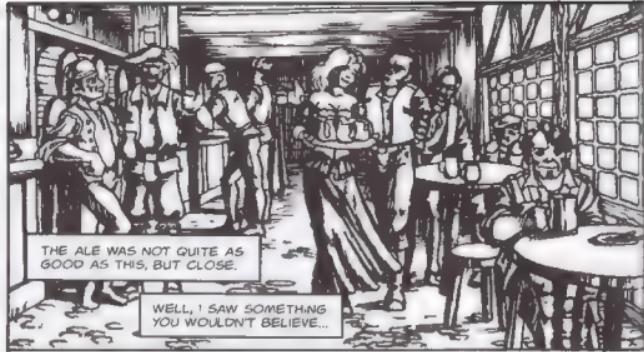
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AND HE SAYS SOMETHING THAT UPSETS THEM SOMETHING LIKE LIKE



HALF NOW, HALF ON DELIVERY!



WHATEVER IT WAS ANGERED THOSE PEOPLE SOMETHING TERRIBLE. THEY STARTED PULLING KNIVES, SWORDS, CROSSBOWS, STARTING SOME TROUBLE!



SO THE SALESMAN LEAPS FROM THE BAR, SNATCHES UP HIS CASE AND HE DIVES IN! JUST DIVES RIGHT IN!!



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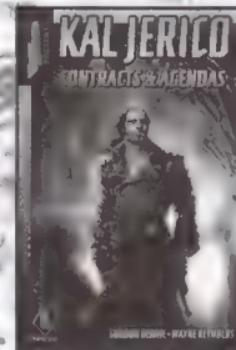


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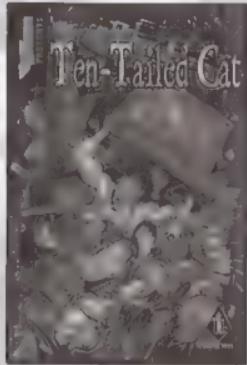
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BAD MEDICINE

A NATHAN CREED STORY • BY JONATHAN GREEN

DR LUDVAN MARVO stood alone next to a seething chem pool, slow bubbles of gas emerging from the iridescent soup sloughing off their viscous skins of effluent film like ripperjack larvae shedding their birthing sacs. The methane emissions burned pink and green in the acid air. He clicked his heels nervously and cast anxious glances into the forest of scaffolding that grew from the detritus around the entrance to the forsaken cross-hive shuttle station.

Marvo was still dressed in his showman's attire: feathered top hat, crimson tails, mandelbrot-patterned spider-silk waistcoat, once white britches and genuine, knee-length rat-skin jackboots. It paid to look good for the punters, people used to the muted, twilight colours of the Necromundan Underhive. It was amazing how a brightly coloured, gold-buttoned costume immediately won the respect of prospective customers. Of course Marvo wasn't his real name and nor was he a doctor of any description, but Dr Marvo was the name he went by: a stage name, as it were.

And he had no name for the pillar-tall, black ragged-robed stranger who emerged from the darkness of the derelict entrance in front of him, at least none that his master had ever deemed to tell him. For where no names are given, people will always create their own. And in the case of the looming, almost skeletal, figure towering over him now, the half-degenerate peoples of the deepest parts of the Underhive had created many. Deathbringer. Corpsemaker. Bonelord. Plagueking.

To the ratskins of the Broken Spar tribe the inhuman creature – for how could anything human smell like this? – was known as the Death Walker. To the scavies of Carborundum Edge it was the Soul Taker. To the judges of Arbites Precinct Thirteen the name of the stranger was synonymous with a number of unsolved cases. Even the primitive scalies had a name for it in their

grunting, almost incomprehensible tongue.

Marvo looked up into the cowed hood of the towering figure – who, to his agitated mind, seemed to stand at least two metres tall – and two, red-rimmed, cataract-shrouded eyes stared back at him. Despite appearing to be two sightless, milky orbs, the figures pupil-less gaze bored into Marvo like an auger. He felt himself physically sag before the relentless, strangely piercing gaze...

And suddenly a feeling of calm overcame him – the calm of a man whose will is no longer his own. The figure spoke for the first time. Had he not been so entranced by the hypnotic cataract-stare Marvo might have thought that the voice reminded him of a broken fan-blade clicking in its cycling revolutions as it grated against a wire-meshed grille.

'You have done well,' the stranger said. 'Girder Bridge, Yakapo's Dome and Deliverance have all fallen to join the ranks of my loyal followers.' If it hadn't been for the stranger's sinister hold over Marvo maybe the charlatan doctor would have noticed that the voice coming from the recesses of the cowl was little more than a death rattle. He might also have been aware of the horrible hissing coming from somewhere behind the looming presence of the black-robed figure. 'When the time comes you will be well-rewarded for your obedience,' the stranger went on, 'but for now there is much still to be done.'

Scab-skinned talon-like hands emerged from the folds of the stranger's ragged robe, holding a stoppered glass flask, which in turn contained a clear, purple liquid. The image of a circle trisected by further curving arcs could just be made out on the remains of a faded, peeling label stuck to its side. The stranger placed the container and its innocuous-seeming contents into Marvo's open palms, cold fingers closing the doctor's hand around the glass.

For the first time since the black-cowled figure had spoken Marvo broke eye contact and looked down at the flask he now held in his hands. 'Just what the doctor ordered,' he said.



NATHAN CREED took a long, languid drag on the cheroot held between his finger and thumb, and eased himself back into the pillow, running the fingers of his other hand through his close-cropped grey hair. Lying on the bed in a sleeveless undershirt and his trousers, he closed his eyes and exhaled with a satisfied groan, finishing it off with a smoke ring. He breathed in deeply again, tensing every muscle in his body as he did so, until his scalp tingled. The room smelled of tobacco smoke, musty bed sheets, stale sweat, and cheap perfume – and he loved it.

Creed opened his eyes. At the foot of the bed his lady-friend, Maisy-Lou, was reattaching a fishnet stocking to her suspender belt. He followed the line of the girl's perfectly proportioned calf up to the smooth olive skin of her thigh and her pert, round backside. He took in the frilly undergarments, the petrol blue basque, her jutting bosom, the alluring cleavage, the swan-like curve of her neck, the cascade of purple hair with the plaits of violet and black, the delicate set of her features, her rosebud lips, the heavily-mascaraed lashes framing her endearing, warm brown eyes.

'Maisy,' he drawled, 'you're the best, baby. You're the best.'

'So when are you going to make an honest woman of me then, Creed?' she said, zipping herself into a tight, and extremely short, black skirt.

'What and take you away from all this?' Creed laughed, taking in the peeling paper, cracked ceiling plaster, bare floorboards and naked light bulb, of the upstairs room where Maisy-Lou entertained her gentlemen visitors, with a sweep of his hand.

Seated at the dressing table, the Ace of Hearts, favourite man-killer eased on a pair of thigh-length rat-fur boots with heels like stiletto daggers. 'In that case, you can get the hell out of here, you bastard,' she said calmly, pulling the bootlaces tight.

'Aw don't be like that, Maisy-Lou. You know you're the only girl for me.'

The saloon-girl stood up and threw a black feather boa around her neck. 'We can't all afford to spend our days lying around in bed.' Her outfit was completed by a top hat covered in dark green crushed velvet. 'Some of us have got work to do.'

Suddenly there were shouts outside and the whomph of a plasma weapon discharging. Someone screamed. The rattle of auto-fire followed. Another plasma discharge. More cries and shouting.

'What the skav was that?' the bounty hunter cursed, startled. A concussive boom, like a fuel tank exploding, rocked the street outside and rattled the windowpanes of the room. Creed was on his feet in seconds. He threw up the grubby window and stuck his head out.

Despite its comparatively large size for an Underhive settlement, Tunnel Town really consisted of just one street that ran between the buildings lining the sides of a vast conduit that was semi-circular in cross-section. To the west the tunnel opened into the spoil hills and ash dunes of crumbling hab-domes. Guild trade routes wound their way through the wastes to the settlements of Ferro's Gulch and Downer's Deep, and further still on to Steel Canyon. To the east the tunnel branched, roads leading uphipe, to the north, and on to the legendary cross-hive highway – and scavy territory – of Thunder Road to the south.

Creed took in the scene at a glance. At the point where the tunnel branched stood the corrugated iron and ceramite façade of Hackbut's Arms House. The burning wreckage of a motorbike – it looked like Wendrell Payne's – lay in the middle of a scorched blast circle in front of the armourer's. The street between Hackbut's and the Ace of Hearts was littered with the bodies of at least half a dozen townsfolk. A sobbing woman was huddled on a veranda.

Almost directly below Creed the bushy-bearded and pony-tailed Wendrell Payne was hunkered down behind a water butt outside the saloon. On the other side of the street another bounty hunter, Kaspar Van Greel, had taken cover behind a crate on which the ratskin was resting the barrel of his sniper rifle. Both of them had been enjoying the hospitality of the saloon downstairs only moments before.

Their target was in the open, striding down the street from Creed's right: a mad-eyed half-breed wielding a plasma pistol. The man was in a frenzy. Creed watched as the lunatic let off a series of energised blasts. Firing haphazardly windows blew out, shop signs melted and water pipes ruptured.

Prayne opened fire with his sawn-off, pump-action shotgun. Sprays of red mist showed where the solid shot rounds had hit the lunatic but the man barely faltered. Two lucky shots fired in rapid succession from the plasma pistol seared towards Van Greel, the first obliterating his cover, the second puncturing the Ratskin's neck. Prayne was fumbling to reload. With his weapon on its low energy setting, the murderous gunman was not so inconvenienced. An energised shell struck Prayne's arm and spun the man round, precious cartridges flying from his fingers.

All this had occurred in only a matter of seconds. Creed turned away, looking at Maisy-Lou grimly.

'Sorry, darling, gotta go!' Creed apologised, pulling on his long leather coat and grabbing his gun-belt from the back of the chair, and burst out of the room.

He took the stairs three at a time, buckling the gun-belt around his waist as he did so. The bar below was empty apart from a few of Maisy's fellow saloon-girls who were crowded in an anxious, scantily-clad huddle at a window. Madam L'Amour's hired help behind the bar wasn't going to win any awards for bravery either, cowering behind the solid plasteel unit.

Reaching the saloon's swing doors Creed slowed, in one fluid motion drawing his two stub guns and spinning the chambers open. Both were fully loaded with dum-dum rounds. A deft flick of the wrist closed them again. Outside the scream of random plasma fire and maniacal yelling continued. With a grin to Madam L'Amour's whimpering protégées and a husky, 'Ladies', Creed stepped into the street.



BLOOD RAN from a number of wounds on the lunatic's body, testimony to the accuracy of the bounty hunters' shots. But still he came on. Saying nothing Creed depressed the two triggers.

Four bullets spiralled through the air, covering the twenty metres between the gunslinger and the gunman in a split second. The first entered the gunman's body through his gut, tearing out the other side taking most of a kidney with it. The second hit his thigh, severing an artery and fracturing the femur. The third shattered a kneecap while the fourth impacted against his ribcage.

The man stumbled, his mad-eyes fixing on Creed. Three more shots followed, disarming the man, tearing open a shoulder and hitting his chest. The gunman slumped into the dirt, face first.

Creed strode forward, both guns trained on the lunatic. Wendrell Prayne got to his feet, following behind.

'Nice shooting, Creed,' he said as they both stood over the man's body. 'Bastard just didn't know when he was dead!'

With a snarl like a ravening beast the gunman jerked into life. Twisting his neck round he sank his teeth into Prayne's leg. As the big man cried out in startled pain, Creed calmly put a bullet between the lunatic's eyes.

'You were saying?'



IN THE AFTERMATH of the bloodbath, townsfolk had gathered at the scene like carrion bats round a scavy kill. As is always the way after unprovoked acts of violence the shocked populace of Tunnel Town wanted to know why the gunman had gone on the rampage.

Snippets of information slowly began to emerge from the morass of gossip, rumour and counter-rumour. After some discussion by the various notaries and town worthies a fairly reliable picture was built up of the man and his movements over the last few weeks.

His name was Plaz Tyburn. He was a half-ratskin drifter and had done a stint bringing in the stinger mould harvest out at Ferro's Gulch. There was evidence of this on his blistered hands where a minor fungal disease known as red-rot, not uncommon among mould farmers, had taken hold.

Creed was at the heart of all these discussions and as the one who had brought Tyburn's rampage to an end the Tunnel Towners turned to him to follow the matter to its resolution – whatever that might be.

It soon became apparent to the bounty hunter that Tyburn's killing spree hadn't started in Tunnel Town either. Following the trail of carnage out into the spoil hills to the west - a thoughtlessly gunned down body here, a smouldering shack there - Creed finally came to the solitary tarpaulin tepee, pitched in the lee of a slag heap, the unfurled tent door flapping in the breeze of ancient air-recyclers.

Cautiously Creed flicked the tarpaulin back with a primed stub gun. The tent was free of occupants. The bounty hunter holstered his guns. There was the drifter's bedroll, the billycan containing the residue of his last meal and a battered rucksack, no doubt containing Tyburn's few personal possessions. Creed nudged the bag open with a booted foot.

A glass bottle rolled out of the bag and rattled onto the floor of the tent. Dregs of a purple liquid sloshed inside it. With a gloved hand Creed picked it up.

A crudely printed label was pasted to the side of the bottle. On it, in lurid magenta ink and an overly-elaborate typeface were the words, 'Dr Marvo's Patent Panacea' and beneath the legend, in smaller print, 'For the Relief of all Aches, Pains, Maladies and Agues. To be taken as required.'

'A cure-all, eh? Creed thought to himself. And looks to me like there's enough left for one more dose.



WELL IT'S QUITE a concoction, I can tell you,' Doc Haze said, looking up from the hazy view-plate. The streams of green-lit runes scrolling up the screen reflected from the doc's glasses and the half-metallic dome of his head, giving him the appearance of some kind of datum-drone. 'You didn't get this from any Guilder trading post, I'll wager.'

'Go on,' the bounty hunter encouraged. The Underhive surgeon-cum-scientist had been reluctant to help at first but once Creed had reminded him that he owed him after the Ignus Mander incident and suggested the doc might like to talk it through with Creed's two associates, Isaiah Haze had changed his tune.

'Of course most of it's water, 78% to be precise, but the "body" of the elixir is made up of all sorts of stuff. The bulk of it's crude algal-based stimulants - nothing so refined as Spur or Slaught. But get this, there's evidence of the neurone plague virus in there too. Not a lot, it's been heavily diluted, but even a trace like this would be enough to trigger full neural breakdown within weeks, and with regular intake of the stuff maybe only days.'

'Zombie plague?' Creed exclaimed

'The one and only.'

Creed had encountered victims of the brain-rotting disease before, in the abandoned tunnels under Toxic Sump. 'You're sure?' he asked.

'No doubt about it,' the scientist said, wiping his hands on the front of his grimy lab coat. 'And if you needed any more proof, your friend over there was suffering from the early stages,' he said, nodding over his shoulder at the dissected corpse lying on the gurney on the other side of the gleaming lab.

'Guess that explains why he went on the rampage.'

'The Tunnel Towners asked me to perform an autopsy just to be sure, but then of course they're paying... Definite lesions in the frontal lobes. It's obvious in spite of the mess your bullet made.' Haze glowered at the bounty hunter. 'Where was it this poor bastard had come from?'

'Ferro's Gulch.'

'Dr Marvo's Patent Panacea,' Haze said, picking up the bottle in a bloodied rubber-gloved hand. 'Never heard of him. I reckon if you want to find out any more about the source of this little problem Ferro's Gulch is the place to go.'

'That's what I was thinking, and you're coming with me,' Creed ginned, evilly.

'I am?'

'You owe me two, remember. You wouldn't want a certain Antrobus Vetch finding out about your double-dealings now would you, doc?'



CREED STOPPED in front of the bridge and looked across the ravine at the settlement of Ferro's Gulch. The low buildings, tractor barns and mould vat sheds

were clustered together at the edge of the precipice. Beyond was prime ground for growing stinger mould. Here the organic sewage of millions of hivers dwelling in the mountain-city kilometres above overflowed from an acre of waste processing plants in the noxious holestead of Fester Hole, only a dome's height above, and washed over the uranium fields in a monthly inundation. In the heat generated by the resulting exothermic reaction the stinger mould thrived. An oasis in the no-man's-land of the wastezones.

Behind the bounty hunter, Doc Haze had also come to a halt, puffing after the brisk walk from Tunnel Town. His hulking servitor One-Eight-Seven was next to him, its generator idling. The slave-machine watched Creed impassively with one human eye and one, cracked red-lensed camera. Its monstrous mechanical left arm twitched from its shoulder mount.

'No sign of life,' Creed drawled. 'You'd think there'd be someone around.'

'I don't like it,' Haze stated, rubbing his hands together nervously.

'You owe me, remember?' Creed reminded him, a hand moving towards a holstered stub gun.

'But after this our debt's clear, right?'

'Have it your way, doc,' the bounty hunter replied, taking the cheroot from his mouth and flicking it at the ground. As he crushed the butt under his boot he saw the muddied piece of parchment trapped in the churned-up ruts created by the treads of some large transport. Creed pulled it free of the dirt.

In gaudy pinks, greens and yellows overly-fussy titles, similar to those on the label of the recovered panacea bottle, proclaimed to those who could read, 'Dr Marvo's Marvellous Medicine Show' and for those who couldn't the image of an enthusiastically smiling, top-hatted, white-bearded bespectacled character held out a stoppered medicine bottle while in the background bent old men danced jigs, their crutches discarded, and a beaming woman had one eye open and one closed.

The lame walk and the blind see, Creed considered. I think I should meet this miracle worker.

'You ever been to a marvellous medicine show, doc?' Creed asked, grinning like a dune shark.

'Er, no,' Haze replied uncertainly, 'although I did catch a freak show down in Perdition once. Men with eyes on stalks, a woman with pincers instead of hands, a thing with more tentacles than a sludge jelly orgy... Scavvies and mutants the lot of them. The Redemptionists thought all their Ascensions of the Emperor had come at once when they caught up with them outside Ratbone Gorge.'

Creed was already halfway across the bridge. 'Come on, doc, and bring your walking screwdriver with you.'



CREED'S FIRST suspicions had been right: Ferro's Gulch was deserted. Balls of tumbleweed bundled along the main street in the fan-wind. Glowglobes flickered fitfully on the concave surface of the dome roof far above. The sign outside the Slygo's Saloon creaked on rusted hinges like a worn-out augmetic. Opposite the drinking-hole a motorbike stood abandoned. However, there were also signs of a battle as clear to the gunslinger as the effluent stench wafting in from the mould fields.

But if there's been some trouble here, Creed pondered piecing the clues together, where are the bodies?

'If you were new in town,' the bounty hunter said, turning to his reluctant companion and taking in the main street with an expansive gesture, 'where would you go to meet the locals, doc?'

'Is this a trick question?' Doc Haze said, scratching at the inflamed skin where his scalp joined his metal skull-plate. Creed grinned at him, making the doc feel even more uncomfortable. 'The drinking hole, of course.'

'So we're in agreement once again. Great minds think alike eh?'

'And fools rarely differ,' Haze muttered under his breath as the bounty hunter strode towards the doors of Slygo's.

'Word to the wise, doc. Let's stick together,' Creed suggested grimly as he approached the saloon's swing doors, unholstering his stubbers, and added, 'Ready, girls?'

The interior of the bar was under a shadowy twilight. Rather than wait for his eyes to adjust to the gloom Creed simply

flicked his photo-visor down from inside the brim of his hat. The scene was instantly picked out in lurid shades of green.

Tables and chairs lay overturned as after a bar-room brawl, broken glass crunching under his boots as he advanced into the otherwise silent saloon. Only it wasn't silent. There was an unsettling chomping sound and a slurping noise like something sucking the marrow from bones.

Creed scanned the bar, seeing everything in graduating shades from almost black through emerald and jade to brilliant viridian. Bodies littered the room, face-down on the floor, lying at unnatural angles over the few still-standing tables, bent backwards over the bar and upturned chairs, slumped against the balustrade of the broad staircase. The whole place smelt of death. And there were things moving in the darkness.

Creed heard the clump of iron feet behind him indicating that Doc Haze and the servitor had entered the building. Something else had heard it too.

A sibilant hiss passed around the room as the plague zombies raised their heads and turned their jaundiced gaze at the intruders.

'By the Spire!' Haze gasped behind him.

The half-dead things abandoned the corpses they had been feasting on and, at the prospect of fresh meat, advanced on the trio.

'I hope you're prepared, doc, because now the killing begins.'

The muzzles of Creed's guns exploded in the darkness and a partially decomposed creature was hurled backwards by the impact of a dum-dum round. But that was only one. Dozens of shambling figures were loping towards, jaws snapping reflexively, ruined throats issuing forth bestial growls.

A half-dead thing, still wearing the torn remnants of a flouncy gown, lurched at Creed. Clumps of tangled blonde hair hung from its parchment-thin scalp and a smudge of lipstick was smeared across its pockmarked lips, which had drawn back from the rictus grin of its fleshless gums. The stub gun kicking in his palm, the bounty hunter put two bullets into the walking corpse, turning its head into an expanding mist of bone, blood and rotted brain tissue.

Beams of searing blue-white light cut through the advancing mass of zombies from behind Creed. Glancing round he saw Doc Haze aiming haphazardly into the pack with a battered laspistol. Close by the unknowingly

altruistic cyborg snapped the neck of a zombie gripped in its vice-claw, crushing the spine of another under a metal hoof.

The bounty hunter quickly assessed the distance between his party and the doors that led to freedom. Ten metres at most but the space between was filled with yet more of the degenerated townsfolk.

On they came, broken teeth snapping relentlessly. Creed knew what could happen if those teeth sank into his flesh... Swinging the stubber in his left hand sideways he found the jaws of a mouldering harridan, gangrenous green blubber sagging horribly on a body gone to fat before becoming infected by the degenerating neurone plague. The brain-dead woman's teeth clamped around the muzzle of the weapon and splintered.

'Eat this!' Creed spat and blew out of the back of her skull.



CREED BUNDLED out of the through the saloon doors, bowling into the fleeing Haze. Using his tumbling momentum, Creed rolled onto his feet and bounded into a run, agile as a ratskin brave.

The bike stood propped up on its stand on the other side of the street. He leapt into the saddle and thumbed the ignition rune. The bike's engine roared into life, growling like a branded synth-ox.

'Get on!' Creed yelled over the deep-throated petrochemical bellow of the beast. The doc didn't need telling twice.

Zombies burst into the street, moaning horribly. There was a crash of splintering wood and One-Eight-Seven barged through the timber wall of the bar, half a revenant saloon-girl clinging to its pistonng legs, a slime-oozing spinal column still locked in its claw.

'Now let's get the hell out of here!' Creed shouted over the bike's diesel-guzzling roar.

The back wheel of the bike spinning wildly, the stink of scorched rubber overwhelming the stench of death in his nostrils, Creed slewed the vehicle round, throwing up a spray of gravel behind them. Then, with an over-revving scream the bike hurtled forwards, bombing along the main street, away from Slygo's Saloon, towards the bridge out of Ferro's Gulch. Creed was leant

forwards over the handlebars, Doc Haze clinging on for dear life, One-Eight-Seven pounding after them on its augmented leg-chassis.

In no time they were crossing the bridge, already doing a breakneck speed, the plasteel sections clattering under the speeding bike's wheels. As soon as they were on the other side, Creed pulled on the brakes. The vehicle skidded to a halt in a cloud of dust.

The bounty hunter pulled two grenades from the recesses of his coat, yanked their pins free with his thumbs and rolled them across the chasm-spanning construction. Two more followed.

'Good thing I picked up a little extra at Hackbut's,' Creed said, thinking aloud. 'Even if he does charge like an overloading fuel cell.'

'What?' the doc queried, intruding on Creed's musings.

'Highly,' he replied.

The bridge joists juddered, this time under the heavy, piledriver footfalls of the chugging servitor. The grenades bounced as they rolled, one dropping between the girders. At the end of the main street the growing zombie pack continued after them. One-Eight-Seven reached the safety of the far side of the chasm.

The grenades detonated in a series of eardrum-battering bangs, accompanied by a blinding pyrotechnics display. The mid-section of the bridge fell away immediately, dropping into the murky abyss below. With a groan of dying metal the rest of the structure buckled and twisted, cantilevering until, with a resounding clang that echoed from the dome roof high above the bulk of the bridge hit the wall of the chasm. The rogue grenade had exploded in a crevice, blowing the rusted stanchions free of the solid face of the ravine.

'That's them taken care of for now,' Creed said, wiping his sweat-beaded brow with the back of a hand, 'but this ain't over yet.'

'So what now?' Haze asked, happy to let the bounty hunter continue to take the initiative, having not wanted to be involved from the start.

'You get back to Tunnel Town, get in touch with your Arbites contacts – and don't look like that, after the last couple of favours I've done for you I know you've got them! Get in touch with your contact and inform what pass for authorities down here about the outbreak in Ferro's Gulch. I'm going to

follow our only other lead. I'm going after this Dr Marvo.'

'And how are you going to do that?' Haze asked, rubbing his hands together in agitation.

'By following those,' Creed said, pointing at the jagged ruts of transport tracks that had churned up the surface of the road leading into and out of the townstead. 'Now, off the bike.'

'You mean I've got to walk?'

'Get your pet monkey-wrench to carry you if you want but I'm out of here before this happens anywhere else,' he stated firmly, jerking a thumb at the baying pack of rotting townsfolk trapped on the other side of the ravine.

Doc Haze dismounted. 'Tell me, Creed, why are you doing this?'

Revving the huge bike's engine, the bounty hunter turned to face the doc. 'Always was a sucker for hard-luck cases,' he pronounced loudly over the growl of the machine. Unbidden an image of Maisy-Lou's pouting face swam into his head. And with that he sped off after the mysterious Dr Marvo.



OUTSIDE THE mining settlement of Downer's Deep, Dr Marvo's Marvellous Medicine Show was in full swing. 'And now, ladies and gentlemen, what you've all been waiting for,' the top-hatted, tinted-spectacled ringmaster-like Dr Marvo announced, displaying via exaggerated gestures that he had nothing in his hands or up his sleeves. 'Brewed from hive-fungi and distilled blindsnake venom, according to a secret recipe passed down by my dear old ratskin grandmother. Allowed to ferment in an actinide still of my own design,' the charlatan's voice was building to a crescendo as he reached the climax of his sales pitch. 'Bathed in the light of phosphor vents for a full cycle and brought to you today as Dr Marvo's Patent Panacea!'

With a dextrous flourish that proved that the hand is indeed faster than the eye, Dr Marvo extracted a corked bottle from out of thin air. The crowd gathered before the gaudily painted wagon with its fold-down makeshift stage gasped, awestruck. Simple sleight of hand, that's all it was, but it got

them every time, the gullible fools. As Dr Marvo liked to say, although never within earshot of a paying customer, there were only three certainties in life in the Underhive: death, the Guild and the fact that Underhivers were gullible idiots, ready to part with their hard-earned credits at the drop of the good doctor's hat – or rather for a drop of the good doctor's 'cure-all'.

Marvo looked out over the crowd of expectant, slack-jawed faces, as a giant spider might inspect the hive-vermin caught in its web.

There was a moment's palpable silence. Then a cracked voice piped up from somewhere at the back of the throng: 'Looks like 'shine to me, sonny!'

'Hiveshine, sir? What, not even Second Best?' A few of the miners laughed at the jibe. Marvo fixed his gaze on the toothless, rat-whiskered little old-timer. He was supporting himself on a pair of crutches.

'Well I wouldn't waste my money on it,' the old man retorted. 'Been a cripple since that day in Number Six shaft seven years ago. No fancy doctoring's ever put it right neither,' he went on. 'Only thing that would, would be a new pair of them cyborg legs from Zircon's mech-shop and I ain't never gonna be able to afford them, now I can't work what with being a cripple an' all.'

'Come forward, sir.' Marvo beckoned to the old man, with the encouraging smile of a tipperjack. 'That's quite some story, sir, and I'd like to do you a favour.'

The old-timer hobbled towards the stage, the crowd parting to let him through. 'What's that then?'

'Would you try some of my 'shine?'

'Go on then. I never likes to turn down a free drink.' Propping the crutches under his arms the old man took the bottle and, with his back to Marvo's audience, took a swig.

'How's it taste?' Dr Marvo asked, a look of wide-eyed excitement on his face.

'Disgusting!' came the vehement reply.

'But of course it tastes disgusting,' laughed Marvo, sticking out his tongue and pulling a face, 'because that's how you know it's doing you good! But how do you feel?'

There was a pause for dramatic tension during which time you could have cut the atmosphere with a chainsword.

'Fantastic!' shouted the cripple. 'I feel fantastic!' With that he dropped his crutches and began hopping up and down on the

spot. 'Why I'll wager Lord Helnawr himself doesn't feel better right this second!' The old-timer grabbed Marvo's hand and shook it vigorously. 'Thank you, son. Thank you kindly. I'll take a bottle!'

'What's your name, sir?' Marvo asked the skipping guinea pig.

'Abrams, Ichabod Abrams!'

'Well, Mr Abrams, it's on the house!' Out of the corner of his eye Marvo could see the credulous miners digging deep for their credits. 'All righty folks, who's going to be the first to buy a bottle?'

A shot rang out across plaza. The crowd turned as one. Standing behind the mass of people was a tall, leather-coated figure, only the stubble on his chin visible under the shadow of his wide-brimmed hat. In one gloved hand he held a wide-muzzled stub gun and in the other an empty glass bottle.

'You people,' the stranger shouted to Marvo's potential customers, 'get outta here!'

Nobody moved.

'Didn't you hear me?' the gunslinger shouted. 'Well maybe you'll hear this!'

He fired off a succession of shots. Screaming and yelling in confusion, the crowd fled. In a few moments the only ones remaining were Marvo, the plant and half a dozen ugly, overweight hired scum.

'I know what you're up to, Marvo!' the gunslinger called across the square. 'Thing is, I'm asking myself, who'd be sick enough to start spreading a neurone plague?'

'And you're not going to find out!' Marvo yelled back angrily. 'Well? What are you waiting for?' the showman screeched at his henchmen. 'Take him out!'



THIS REALLY ISN'T fair, Creed thought as he picked his targets, almost leisurely, there's six of them and only one of me. They really haven't got a hope, the poor sons-of-sumpsuckers!

Not only were the sort of scum Marvo could afford to hire overweight and out of shape but in his time as a bounty hunter in the Underhive Creed had taken on plague zombies, an alien ork, a pyromaniac wyrd and a whole gang of scavvies single-handedly – and won!

'Okay, ladies,' Creed called to the charging gun-waving scum, 'shall we dance?'



GET UP THERE and drive!' Marvo screamed at the now miraculously cured old-timer. Spluttering, Abrams clambered into the cab of the transport while Marvo hastily pulled up the fold-down stage, locking the side of the transport in place. Bullets spangled off the reinforced plasteel hull, chipping the paint that spelt out the legend 'Dr Marvo's Marvellous Medicine Show'. As the engine roared into life, Marvo leapt into the caravan-cum-sales booth through the open back.

'What did he mean, neu-rone plague?' Abrams called back, over his shoulder, from the driver's cab.

'What?' Marvo blustered.

'I've nothing against conning a few dumb dirt-diggers out of their creds but I ain't having anything to do with no neu-rone plague!'

'Not now, you old fool! Just get us out of here!' Marvo screamed as a gurgling cry signalled that at least one of the hired scum was dead. 'Or do you actually want to taste some of the merchandise just for once?'

Oily-black smoke belching from its exhaust stack, the rig lurched forward. Marvo stumbled sideways as he tried to keep his balance and bumped into a drum lashed into the back of the transport. Inspiration hit with the first bump in the road. Tugging the rope free of the barrel, a hefty kick then jettisoned it from the back of the moving vehicle.

The full fuel-drum crashed onto the road, its lid spinning free and its contents splashing onto the cracked rockrete of the plaza. Clinging to a roll-bar Marvo watched the fuel wash around the feet of the betrayed scum and spread across the square towards the interfering stranger. A struck match would be all it would take...



CREED SAW THE danger before the slow-witted scum, the three that were left anyway. The rapidly expanding oil slick erupted in a burst of orange and vermillion flames two metres high. Creed sprinted for the bike he had left idling at the edge of the square, the burning rabble screaming as the fire engulfed them.

Gunning the throttle, Creed drove the bike free of the fire-slick. Steering it round the rubble-strewn edge of the plaza he took off after Marvo's rig. Marvo had a head start on the bounty hunter but on a bike, over rough ground, Creed reckoned he had the advantage. Sure enough, only two clicks out of Downter's Deep he caught up with the gas-guzzling caravan.

Don't rate my girls' chances against that monster, he thought, the wind whipping his coat tails out behind him and threatening to remove his hat. Besides, it takes all my strength to control this thing with both hands on the column. Only one way to do this and that's up close.

Accelerating, Creed pulled level with the jerking rig as it bounced back through the hills towards Ferro's Gulch. Before the driver realised what he was doing, still gripping the handlebars tightly Creed sprang up onto the bike's padded seat.

Here goes nothing!

With an almighty leap Creed propelled himself upwards. He hit the side of the rocking transport and grabbed onto the edge of the roof. The bike swerved into a bank of compacted ash, crashing onto its side and the engine cutting out.

After a moment's desperate scrambling he pulled himself onto the roof and lay there, spread-eagled, attempting to recover his breath.

The ghost town of Ferro's Gulch loomed grey in the distance. In front of it, the deep black scar of the gulch itself opened like a wound in the compacted ash and spoil.

As Creed lay there he could hear the angry Marvo cursing as he stumbled about inside the back of the rig. Guns aren't going to be much good in this situation, Creed considered. He slipped his bootknife from its sheath against his calf and clenched it tightly between his teeth. With both hands free he grabbed the roll-bar at the back of roof and, somersaulting forwards, swung himself into the back of the transport.

He landed squarely in the back of the wagon. The charlatan doctor stood behind the driver's cab surrounded by the periphery of his life and trade. In one hand he held a glass flask containing a clear, fizzing, purple liquid. In the other was a large syringe, which he was filling from the flask.

'This is the neat stuff,' Marvo chuckled, a manic gleam in his eye. 'Symptoms like these need special treatment.' The insane doctor lunged, the syringe clasped in his hand like a dagger, as if he intended to stab it through Creed's heart. The ravine loomed larger through the front of the cab.

Then the knife was in his hand. Creed pulled back his arm. As he flung the knife, the transport bumped as a wheel went over a particularly large obstacle. The blade sailed past Marvo's ear before hitting the back of the driver's neck. Marvo's plant slumped lifelessly over the steering wheel. The momentum of the jolt sent Marvo stumbling into the unsteady bounty hunter. Wrong-footed Creed toppled backwards. Then, for a brief moment, there was air beneath them and the two men fell out of the back of the wagon into the dust and dirt of the road. With a squeal of tyres on twisted metal the rumbling rig hit the edge of the demolished bridge and went over the edge of the ravine.

Creed rolled in the dirt, the shrill scream of the transport's engine ringing in his ears until it was killed by a grating, axle-shearing crash which in turn was followed by a seismic detonation, as the rig hit the floor of the chasm. An expanding cloud of black smoke and roiling crimson flames rose above the rift.

In an instant the bounty hunter was on his feet, both stub guns in his hands and trained on the sprawled, facedown form of Dr Marvo. 'Up you get, you crazy son-of-a-bitch, nice and slow.'

Marvo flinched. Creed tightened his trigger fingers then stopped. He could hear an almost imperceptible fizzing sound. Marvo's body spasmed again. Stepping forwards cautiously Creed gave the doctor's body a sharp kick, flipping the charlatan onto his back. The bounty hunter gave an involuntary gasp and took a sudden step back.

Dr Marvo's face had begun to dissolve. His nose had melted into the nasal cavity as if eaten away by acid while his teeth rattled

loosely in gums turned to bloody pulp. The man's eyes bulged, crying tears of bubbling fluid that in turn ate into his drawn cheeks. Then Creed realised that the same process was affecting the rest of the man's body. It was as if it was being eaten away by acid from the inside.

Sticking out of Marvo's waistcoat was the syringe, the hypodermic needle sunk deep into his chest, the plunger fully depressed. Marvo had landed on his own weapon. It didn't need Doc Haze to work out that such a large dose of undiluted neurone plague injected directly into his bloodstream was more than Marvo's body could cope with. The result: total cellular collapse.

'How's that for a taste of your own medicine?' Creed muttered as he holstered his stubbers and turned away. Scum like Marvo's always have a bounty on their heads, the bounty hunter decided, and I'm the man to collect.

He didn't have far to walk to recover the bike. At last he managed to right it. Creed remounted, punched the ignition rune and, the engine purring like a contented feline, headed back towards Downer's Deep.

I could get used to this, he said to himself as he rode off into the silver-white lithium haze of globe-set.



ADARK-ROBED figure, tall and thin and motionless as a stalagmite, watched the gunslinger leave. Behind it a group of hissing half-decomposing things sensed their master's cold fury – despite being brainless beasts – and slunk back, deeper into the shadows of the conduit tunnel. They snarled uneasily, instinctively reacting to their master's abyss-black mood.

'I know, my pets, I know,' came a voice from within the fold of the figure's cowl like talons scraping on slate. 'I predict there will be a reckoning between us and the downhive desperado. In time.'

And then the tomb-dark figure was gone on the fan-winds, back into the shadows. Back to the deadzones. Back to the darkest places of the Underhive to continue his work. And to wait. ▀



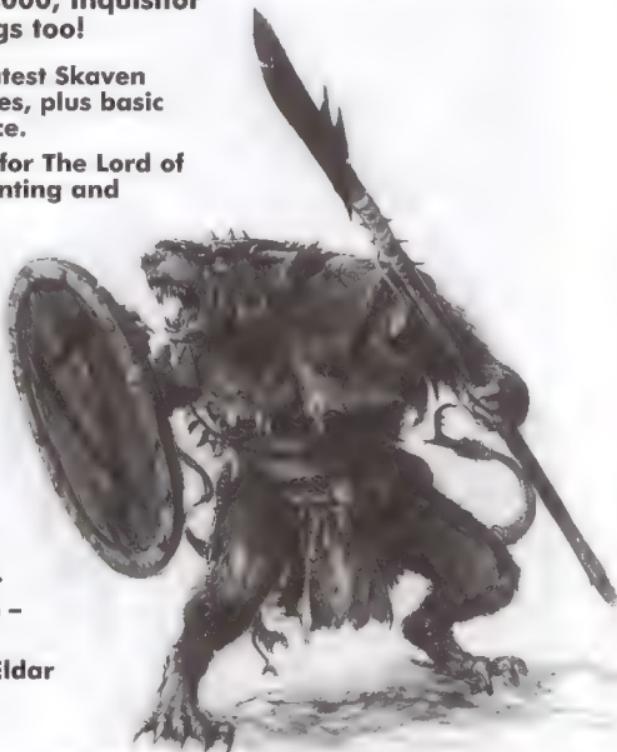
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the
Grass
Murd
The

JARKNESS WAS approaching as the three knights neared the outskirts of the village, their horses hooves thumping on the rain slick timbers of the bridge. Below them, the river foamed white, swollen by the recent rains washing down the flanks of the Grey Mountains. The roadway led within a badly constructed wooden palisade wall and lamplight from behind shuttered windows cast shafts of light in their path. The air was thick with the smell of woodsmoke.

A wooden sign nailed to an empty guard booth at the end of the bridge proclaimed the village's name as Gugarde. An ugly name for an ugly town, thought Luc Massone as he and his two companions rode through the broken gateway into town. Luc knew that Bretonnian towns were never the most aesthetically pleasing places at the best of times, but this was a particularly offensive example. His father's estates to the south of Couronne were much more attractive to the eye. Luc was a powerfully built figure, with a thick mane of black hair and darkly handsome face. A long, white scar trailed from his right temple to his chin, giving him a cruel, sardonic expression.

As they rode deeper into the town, he knew they were being watched. Fitful slivers of light as tattered drapes were drawn aside behind barred windows told him as much. Luc knew that three armoured knights on horseback would not pass unnoticed in a squalid little town like this.

'This place reeks of fear,' said Fontaine, Luc's second brother, riding on his left. 'They hang witchbane and daemonroot above their doors. Mayhap the stories were true.'

Luc smiled at the unmistakable edge of anticipation in Fontaine's voice.

'Did I not tell you so?' answered Luc, 'We shall find the dark ones soon, I am sure. Evil like theirs does not die easily.'

'Then are we three enough?' asked Belmonde, Luc's youngest brother. 'If the nightwalkers have truly returned should we not have come in greater numbers?'

Luc sighed in exasperation at Belmonde's foolishness. His brother would never learn. 'And if we brought an army and smashed down their keep stone by

stone would that make you a knight? Where would the honour be? How then would you prove your manhood to father with a horde of screaming peasants at your back? No, if we are to do this, we do it alone. Only in this way can you become a knight of the realm as I am.'

Suitably chastened, Belmonde did not reply. Luc reined in his horse before a low-roofed building, the odious stench of unwashed bodies and boiled vegetables emanating from within. A faded sign above the door bore a crude etching of a many-turreted castle below which were carved the words, 'The Manor'.

Luc laughed at the inappropriateness of the name as the brothers dismounted, tethering their horses to the inn's only hitching rail while Belmonde did likewise with their pack mule. Casting a distasteful glance at the establishment, Luc and his brothers ventured within.



THE STENCH OF the inn was an almost physical thing, all-encompassing and overpowering. The sweat of hard labour, poor food and stale beer mingled into a pungent aroma that caught in the back of his throat. The inn was surprisingly full and, conspicuously, none of the bar's patrons raised their eyes to the knights. A surly looking barkeep sat behind a trestle bar at the end of the room and Luc's annoyance rose as he moved through them. Did these peasants not realise the honour he brought them merely by deigning to enter their stinking establishment? He drew a gold coin from a purse hanging from his sword belt and dropped it onto the bar.

'There are three horses and a pack mule outside,' he stated. 'See to it that they are fed, watered and stabled adequately for the night.'

The innkeeper's eyes bulged at the sight of the coin, more wealth than he would normally see in a year, and he snatched it up in his meaty fist. His eyes darted suspiciously around the room, frightened

that others might see his sudden good fortune. He smiled and barked, 'Antoine! Move your worthless carcass and take the lords' horses to the stables! Hurry now!'

In response, a harried looking youth scurried quickly from the inn.

'We shall also be requiring rooms, food and wine,' continued Luc. 'This should ensure that they are of the requisite quality...' He dropped another coin on the wooden bar, its clatter causing heads to turn throughout the inn. The innkeeper scooped up the second coin as quickly as the first.

'You shall have the very best my lords!' said the man. 'Best in all Bretonnia!'

'I somehow doubt that,' replied Luc airily, 'but do what you can.'

He turned his back on the man and made his way to an empty table next to the window. Conversations that had been low and subdued before now ceased altogether and every man in the bar stared into his tankard as though fascinated by its contents.

'Luc,' whispered Belmonde urgently, 'do you know how much you gave that man?'

'Of course,' answered Luc, 'It is only money, and a Bretonnian knight needs not money.'

Fontaine smiled, thinking he understood his brother's intentions, and said, 'Yes, one must always be prepared to help the lower orders. You must learn this, Belmonde, if you are to be part of this, the brothers Massone's quest...'

Silence filled the expectant gap left hanging by Fontaine's words and he struggled to conceal his anger as no one in the bar took the bait of his statement. Belmonde, finally grasping his brother's vain theatrics, said, 'Yes, Fontaine. To destroy the evil blood drinkers that dwell in Blood Keep we must be true to the vows we swore in the Lady's Chapel in Couronne. We must...'

His words trailed off in the face of Luc's stare. Unaware of Luc's chagrin, Fontaine continued, 'Indeed, brother. For such is our quest, to do battle with the creatures of the night that plague these noble people, that carry their children to Blood Keep and drain them of their souls. To face the vampires!'

Fontaine sat back in his chair, the barest hint of a self-satisfied smirk playing around the corners of this mouth. A throat cleared at a table beside the fireplace and his grin widened as an aged voice began to speak.

'If you are truly heading to Blood Keep then you are even more stupid than you look.'

Fontaine's grin vanished and he surged to his feet, face scarlet and his hand flashing to his sword hilt. A blur of silver steel and the blade was in his hand.

'Who dares insult my honour?' he roared, eyes scanning the wary crowd. A single pair of eyes rose to meet Fontaine's. A man, bent by age and toil, his skin worn and leathery, whose eyes, despite the twin ravages of time and alcohol, were clear and blue, haunted by a wisdom that belied his appearance.

Fontaine's resolve faltered as he met the old man's gaze, but his pride would not allow him to back down now. He held the sword at the old man's throat and said, 'Were you a worthy foe I would challenge you to a duel. But I am a man of honour and will not strike one so venerable.'

The man shrugged, as though the matter was of no consequence, saying, 'You are a fool to think you can defeat the Blood Knights. They are warriors beyond compare. I know. I stood in the ranks when the Duc de Montfort fought them at Gisoreux. He was a great man, but the vampires cut him down like a child.'

Luc stood and gently lowered Fontaine's sword arm.

'I am also a warrior of no small repute, old man,' Luc began. 'In Kislev they called me Droyaska - blademaster - and in the northern wastes, the Chaos beasts know me as the "One who walks with Death". It is the night stalkers who should be wary of me.'

Fontaine spun his sword, sheathing it in one smooth motion and sat down as Luc stood before the wizened figure.

The old man fixed Luc with his piercing gaze, looking deep into the young knight's eyes. He leaned forwards and whispered, 'There is fierce pride within you, boy. I see it plain as day, but do not travel to Blood Keep. If you do, you will all die. I can say it no more plainly than that. Heed my warning, leave this place and do not return.'

Luc smiled and turned his back on the old man, addressing the bar's patrons, 'Know this, people of...'

'Gugarde,' whispered Fontaine.

'Gugarde,' continued Luc smoothly. 'We travel on the morrow for Blood Keep and the vampires. That my name shall be remembered is reward enough.'

His speech over, Luc spun on his heel and strode in the direction of the stairs to the upper floors.

'Innkeeper!' he barked. 'Show us to our rooms and I demand you bring us the finest wines you possess.'



ATHIN MIST hung over the muddy road as the three knights led their horses from the gloom of the stable into the weak morning sunlight. Luc tethered his black gelding to the hitching rail again and slid his sword from its oiled scabbard. He moved to the centre of the road, swinging his weapon in easy arcs around his body, loosening the muscles of his shoulders. He slowed his breathing and held the blade before him, the quillons level with his face. Suddenly he lunged, spinning and twisting, the blade a sweeping arc of silver as it spun in a glittering web before the knight. Luc's bladework was flawless, every movement perfectly balanced and controlled. Cut, thrust, parry and riposte, Luc's sword became an extension of his flesh. He finished his exercises by making one last, neck-high cut, spinning the weapon by its pommel and scabbarding it.

Luc returned to his horse, examining the beast's legs and hooves. The stable lad, Antoine, had obviously looked after the horse. Its flanks were clean and groomed and the leather saddle had been given a fresh coating of oil. He crouched beside the gelding and tightened the saddle cinch before climbing onto the horse's back. He stared up into the soaring mountains and felt a thrill of anticipation surge through him. He was so close to his goal he could

almost taste it. High above him, the blackened fastness of Blood Keep awaited him. All his years of questing and battle had led him to this point and now that he was here, he was faintly amused to discover that there was a tremor of fear mixed with his excitement. Would he prove worthy? Almost as soon as he formed the thought, he chided himself for his lack of faith. Had he not fought the mightiest foes and vanquished them? The real question should be, was this quest worthy of him?

He twisted in the saddle to make sure his brothers were ready and saw the young lad, Antoine, standing by the stable door, casting hopeful glances at the armoured warriors. Luc fished in his purse and drew out a copper coin, flicking it in the boy's direction. The boy scampered forwards and caught the coin, hesitantly approaching Luc. He smiled nervously, exposing yellowed stumps of broken teeth.

'Sir knight?' he began.

Luc scowled. 'I have no more coin for you boy.'

'No, sir,' said the boy shaking his head, 'I don't want no more of your money.'

'Really?'

'Really,' said Antoine. 'I want to come with you, to fight the vampires.'

Luc laughed and slapped his thigh with mirth, 'You want to fight the vampires, boy? How old are you?'

'Not sure, sir knight. I think maybe thirteen. I can be your squire. I can carry stuff and I can cook and clean swords and stuff. Please?'

'It takes more than that to become a square boy,' said Luc sternly. 'Years of training, noble spirit and the right heritage. Can you match up to that?'

Antoine's head dropped and he muttered, 'I know a short-cut up the mountains to the keep as well.'

Luc's interest was suddenly piqued. He could see the boy was close to tears at the thought of being left behind and sighed. He didn't need this, now of all times. But if the boy knew a quicker route through the mountains then perhaps he might be useful after all.

'Very well,' said Luc, 'you may ride the pack mule and will do exactly as I say when I say it. You displease me even once and I

will send you back here. Do you understand me?'

Antoine nodded enthusiastically, 'Yes, sir! I do! You won't be sorry, I promise.'

'I'd better not be,' snarled Luc in what he hoped was a suitably fearsome voice.

Fontaine walked his horse next to Luc and whispered, 'Luc, are you sure about this? Do we really want this boy travelling with us? We will not be able to protect him properly if we are to go into battle.'

Luc nodded. 'The boy claims to know a short-cut through the mountains. I shall let him lead us to the pass then send him on his way. He'll be in no danger and I'll look out for him if things turn vicious. You worry too much Fontaine. We are on the road to glory brother. Have faith.'

Fontaine shrugged, 'You know best, Luc.'

'Yes,' agreed Luc, 'I do. Now come on, I want to get as far up the mountains as possible before it gets dark. Even if the boy's short-cut is genuine, I do not believe we will reach Blood Keep before nightfall, but I want to be sure we'll get there while it's daylight the following day.'

Luc touched his spurs to the horse's flank and the small group headed north along the mud-choked street, Antoine swaying on the back of the pack mule. At the edge of the village, next to the village cemetery, the group passed a small, ill-kept shrine to the Lady of the Lake. A few flowers and a pile of mouldy grain were the only offerings within the alcove and the three knights bowed their heads as they passed. Overhead a carrion bird circled, black wings spread against the struggling sunlight.



THE SUNLIGHT burned through the mist within the hour and the ground began to grow noticeably steeper. The day had warmed and Luc removed his helmet. It was warm now, but he knew that once they climbed higher into the mountains, the temperature would plummet rapidly. The short-cut Antoine

had shown them had cut nearly seven miles from their journey and Luc was in fine spirits. The air was clear and Luc breathed deeply, enjoying the sense of freedom he suddenly felt.

The morning passed uneventfully, the path up the mountains allowing them to make good time. The miles were covered quickly, though the horses were tired and Luc called a halt to their climb as the sun reached its zenith. Antoine walked and fed the horses as the knights rested and ate a light meal of black bread and cheese accompanied by a bottle of Estalian wine. Luc leaned back against a boulder and peered into the snow capped mountains, their tops wreathed in ghostly grey clouds.

Separating the land of Bretonnia from the heathen land of the Empire, the Grey Mountains towered above him. Blood Keep nestled in a narrow pass that connected the two lands and had once been a mighty fortress, home to a noble order of warrior knights that had protected the lands hereabouts from harm. The knights had been renowned for their honour and martial skills, the very sight of their banner enough to send cold jolts of fear through the servants of evil.

Legend told that one day a warrior had presented himself at the gates and demanded to join the order. It was said that this had been the deathless knight known as Walach of the Harkon family and that he had, in one night, infected the order with the curse of vampirism. The knights took the ancient name of the Blood Dragon order as their own and years of terror and bloodshed were unleashed on the lands surrounding their fortress. It had taken the combined might of four orders of Empire knights to stand against the vampires and drive them back to their fortress. After three years of siege, the gates were finally breached and the castle put to the torch. The knights and witch hunters slew the vampires and the evil legacy of Blood Keep passed into history. To this day, it was believed that their evil had been defeated, but Luc knew that the bloodline still lived.

Deep in the northern Chaos wastes he had fought one of the soulless vampire knights and cut the head from his body in a battle that almost cost him his life and left him with the long, white scar on his face.

Luc had gazed upon the seraphic face of the vampire and watched in amazement as his youthful face had aged centuries in a matter of seconds before disintegrating into ashes. The vampire's blood-red armour, exquisitely detailed with intricate scrollwork and moulded muscles, was all that remained of the creature. It was a work of art and Luc could tell that it was incredibly ancient. The vampire must have been hundreds of years old, yet looked no different than Luc's youngest brother, its youth prolonged for all eternity!

Luc shook his head at the memory, remembering the feelings the vampire's demise had stirred within him. He finished his bread and pushed himself to his feet. They set off again and continued further up the mountain, the air becoming colder as they went higher and higher into the peaks. The sun dropped behind them, bathing the Loren Forest in a golden glow as the day wore on.

'Luc?' said Fontaine, startling him from his thoughts.

'What?'

'It is getting late. Should we not send the boy home?'

Luc glanced round at Antoine, cursing as he raised his eyes to the darkening sky and realised that it was too late to send the boy back.

'No, he will need to make camp with us tonight. I will send him back tomorrow. Where we go he cannot follow.'

'Where shall we make camp?'

Luc scanned the horizon, spying a circle of jagged boulders perhaps an hour's ride uphill. He pointed to the spot he had selected. 'There, we'll make camp in the rocks yonder.'



NIIGHT DREW IN swiftly and it was dark long before they arrived at the circle of boulders. A wolf howled in the distance and the knights paused in their ascent. An answering chorus of howls echoed mournfully across the darkness and the

horses whinnied in fear, eyes wide and ears pressed flat against their skulls. Antoine once again took the horses as they reached the rocks and Belmonde began preparing a fire in the lee of a flat-sided boulder. Satisfied that all was well, Luc walked to the edge of the camp and stared into the inky blackness, his thoughts on the castle above them and the beings that were said to have returned to dwell within it.

The mountains were a different place at night. Where earlier he could see for hundreds of miles in all directions, now he could barely see his hand before his face. The fire behind him illuminated a pitifully small area, its fitful light a tiny island of life in the night's darkness.

Luc returned to the fire, the reflected heat from the boulder beginning to warm him now. He settled down on his haunches, watching as Antoine unpacked a pot, some chopped meat, vegetables and oats from the panniers on the pack mule. Luc suddenly realised how hungry he was, his mouth watering at the thought of a hearty broth.

'You'll need some water for that pot,' pointed out Fontaine. 'There's a stream about twenty yards or so that way.'

Antoine glanced fearfully in the direction Fontaine had indicated, unease plain on his features. Luc sighed, 'Take a torch from the fire, boy. And don't be long, I'm so hungry my belly thinks my throat's been cut.'

Reluctantly, Antoine took up a burning brand and picked his way over the uneven ground in the direction of the stream. The brothers chuckled as they heard the boy cursing as he slipped on the uneven shale. Fontaine followed the bobbing torch as Antoine made his way towards the stream. A sudden sense of premonition made him glance uphill from the lad's position as he caught sight of sinuous movement at the edge of the torchlight. He sat bolt upright, reaching for his sword as he saw more shadowy forms with red coals for eyes surrounding the boy.

'No!' yelled as the first wolf attacked, a bolt from the darkness with gleaming fangs and claws. The boy barely had time to scream before the giant wolf's jaws closed on his head, tearing his face off in a spray of blood. Claws like knives raked down his chest, laying him open to the bone. The

creature's body was briefly illuminated by the torchlight as it attacked, rotting skin and bone glistening wetly through mange ridden fur.

Antoine's body spasmed as he died, his hand swinging around and thrusting the torch into the wolf's body. It howled as long-dead flesh and fur ignited spectacularly. The sudden flare of the wolf's death cast a wider ring of illumination and Luc had a brief glimpse of over a dozen undead wolves closing on them. The knights drew their swords, Luc grabbing Fontaine's arm as he made to rush to Antoine's aid.

'He's dead!' he snapped. 'There's nothing we can do for him now!'

Fontaine nodded curtly, and stood back to back with his brothers, the fire at their centre.

Antoine was dead for sure. All they could do was avenge him and fight off these devil dogs as best they could. Their war-horses reared and stamped the ground as the wolves circled them, hooves lashing out as the beasts came in range. One wolf pounced forward, jaws wide. An iron shod hoof smashed its skull to shards with a single blow.

'Don't leave the firelight!' yelled Luc as a wolf leapt at him. He ducked, swinging his sword in a short, brutal arc. His blade disembowelled the wolf, decaying entrails spilling from the wound. Its carcass landed on the fire, sparks and embers flying.

Howls echoed as the wolves attacked en masse. Luc drew his dagger and thrust the blade between the fanged jaws of another hell beast. It howled and rolled away, tearing the weapon from his hand. He side-stepped and swept his sword down, beheading another wolf. Fontaine staggered from the fire, his shoulder guard torn away by powerful claws. He dropped to his knees, a wolf's jaws snapping shut on his vambrace. The armour held and Fontaine grunted in pain as the metal compressed on the flesh of his forearm. Luc thundered his boot into his brother's attacker, feeling ribs break under the impact. He stabbed with his sword and another beast was silenced. Luc pulled Fontaine to his feet, dragging him back to the fire.

Belmonde swung wildly with his sword and a burning torch. The wolves snarled, wary of the flames. The three brothers regrouped at the fire, their breathing

shallow and laboured. The pack mule was down, screaming as blood pumped from its torn belly. Again the wolves charged, to be met by the steely defences of the knights. Keen blades flashed in the firelight and blood splashed the rocks. Luc slashed and cut, killing wolves with every stroke. The carnage continued until the first cold, grey slivers of light began spilling over the high peaks. With a howl of defiance the wolves melted into what darkness remained, leaving their slaughtered kin behind. Belmonde slumped to the ground, his armour streaked in gore, his face lined with exhaustion.

Fontaine sat next to him, wiping the blade of his sword clean on a dead wolf. Like his brother, he was covered in blood. Luc stared up the mountainside, grinning fiercely and raised his sword to the lightening sky.

'I am Luc Massone!' he shouted, 'and I am coming to Blood Keep!'

He turned to his brothers and walked to where the war-horses stood, their flanks heaving and nostrils flared. The animals bled from scores of wounds, but they were alive. It was not for nothing that Bretonnian war-horses were renowned as the finest cavalry mounts in all the realms of Man. He sheathed his sword and gently stroked each animal's head, calming them with soft words. Finally he allowed himself to sit next to his brothers.

'Well done,' he said. 'You fought well. I am proud of you both.'

For long seconds no one spoke until Belmonde's head snapped up.

'Antoine!' he groaned, standing on weary muscles and limping across to where the boy had died. The burnt corpse of the wolf lay where it had fallen, a pile of stinking ashes, the wood of the brand lodged in the remains.

But there was no sign of the boy, just a wide crimson stain on the rocks.

THE BROTHERS divided the supplies from the dead mule and set off with the dawn's light. Luc knew Fontaine and Belmonde had been shaken by the wolves' attack and he couldn't blame them. Such beasts were feared throughout the Old World, but Luc had faced horrors a hundred times worse and prevailed. A pack of mangy wolves would not stop him from achieving his destiny.

The journey became slower as the ground became more treacherous and icy, the path vanishing as they climbed past the snowline and the weather quickly worsened. Several times their horses stumbled on the slick rocks and the knights were forced to dismount, leading their horses over ice-covered ledges. All three were well wrapped in thick furs, yet still the wind leeched the heat from their bodies as it knifed through them. Hours passed in a white haze, swaying with exhaustion, the freezing temperature robbing them of strength.

'Luc! We must turn back!' implored Fontaine, moving alongside his eldest brother.

Luc shook his head violently, 'No! We go on. It can't be far now.'

'You said that two hours ago.'

'I know what I said, damn you!' snarled Luc. 'We're almost there. I feel it in my bones. We cannot stop now! I will not stop!'

Luc dragged his mount onwards, ending the discussion.

Another hour of frozen misery passed before they crested a snow covered rise and a vast shape emerged from the whiteness. At first Luc wasn't sure what he was seeing as he stared into the flurries of white before him. Then, gradually, shapes began to resolve themselves from the blizzard. Jutting from the rocks, shattered walls and breached bastions loomed out of the falling snow. Smashed turrets and broken merlons, all that remained of the ruined fortress-monastery reared vast and bloated, like jagged and blackened teeth. Before them lay the rotting carcass of what had once been one of the mightiest citadels in the Old World. Splintered gates hung on sagging hinges and the air of desolation was palpable.



Luc turned to Fontaine and smiled in triumph.

'Blood Keep,' he said.



A SINGLE, lonely path wound its way over the rocks towards the broken gates and the knights directed their horses towards the remains of Blood Keep. Luc smiled, breaking the ice that sweat had formed on his skin. He was here! Nothing could stop him now. He glanced over at his brothers and his smile faltered, but as he imagined the rewards of success, he put such thoughts aside.

'I dislike this place,' said Belmonde as they entered the cold shadow of the keep's walls. 'We should not be here.'

Luc said nothing, urging his mount further up the path. The walls soared nearly sixty feet above him, the stonework blackened by fire and the rubble infill spilling from holes blasted long ago by Empire cannon. A shiver passed through Luc as he entered Blood Keep and though he told himself it was the cold, he only half believed it.

They found themselves within a wide, granite-flagged courtyard, drifts of snow piled high against the walls. Wind whistled through the stables and lean-to's around the walls, a ghostly lament to the warriors who had once occupied this place. The main keep of the fortress squatted against the sheer rock face of the mountains, its main gateway also splintered and broken. Blackened loopholes in the wall gaped like empty eye sockets and Luc could not help but feel he was being watched.

He gently patted his horse's flanks. The beast was exhausted and frightened. Something about this place had the beast's hackles raised and looking round he saw that the other horses were similarly wary. His brothers moved to stand alongside him.

'What now?' asked Belmonde, staring at the inner keep.

'We find the vampires,' answered Luc, untying his shield from his war-horse. 'Come on.'

His brothers shared an uneasy glance and also took up their shields, following Luc as he walked his horse towards the inner keep. Fontaine looked into the sky as Belmonde tied the horses to a broken timber spar. He couldn't see the sun and wondered how long it would be until nightfall.

The three brothers stood together at the gate and drew their swords.

'Come, brothers,' smiled Luc. 'The vampires await.'



THE DARKNESS within was absolute, as though light itself were afraid to venture too deeply. Two skeletons lay inside the gateway, slumped against the wall and still clutching rusted spears. Luc crouched before the nearest cadaver, tearing two lengths of cloth from its tattered tunic. He snapped the shaft of the dead sentinel's spear and wrapped the cloth around one end, passing the other half and some of the cloth to Belmonde. Fontaine dug out a tinderbox and lit the dry fabric, the light from the torches illuminating the passage with a flickering glow.

Luc set off without a backward glance, advancing down the wide corridor with his torch held before him. Murder holes pierced the ceiling and arrow loops punctuated the walls. Luc could imagine the horrific casualties the Empire knights must have suffered attacking down this hallway. The passage ended at a sharp right turn, ascending a spiral staircase into the cobwebbed darkness. Luc swapped the sword into his left hand, knowing that the turn of the stairs would prevent him from using the sword effectively in his right. He slid along the outer wall of the stairs, his weapon extended before him, having learned to use either hand with the same deadly skill.

The knights emerged into an echoing cloister, the air musty with the stench of decay. Hundreds of skeletons littered the floor, clustered around an oaken double door, their armour rusted through and bones filmed with the dust of centuries.

'Do you know where you are going?' whispered Fontaine nervously.

'Of course,' hissed Luc. 'To find the vampire's lair.'

'Then should we not be looking for a way down rather than up?' said Belmonde. 'I was led to believe that vampires would make their lairs within underground crypts and sepulchres.'

Luc shook his head. 'The main hall will be where we shall find these vampires. I am sure of it.'

His brothers looked unconvinced, but Luc pressed on before they had time to contradict him, stepping carefully over the skeletal warriors towards the door at the end of the cloister. The door was splintered at its centre and he pushed it open, beckoning his brothers to follow as he slipped through into the main hall.

Golden sunlight filtered in through high windows, partially blocked with rotted velvet drapes, revealing a long banqueting hall with a gigantic wooden table running its length. Shields and suits of blood-red armour lined the walls, below crossed lances, unlit torches and faded tapestries.

Belmonde and Luc passed down one side of the table, Fontaine the other, lighting the torches set in the sconces as they went. Their armoured boots echoed loudly in the deserted hall.

'The table is set for drinking,' said Belmonde, nodding towards empty goblets placed before every seat.

'But not eating,' pointed out Fontaine. 'Where are the plates?'

'The vampire does not take sustenance as we do, brother,' answered Luc.

Fontaine grimaced and advanced towards the massive fireplace, bending his head towards the grate. He turned back to Luc and said, 'This smells of woodsmoke, a fire has been lit here recently. And look, there is fresh-cut wood here. Why would the undead require heat?'

Luc joined his brother at the fireplace. He shrugged. 'I do not know, Fontaine. Perhaps other travellers have passed this way recently.'

'And stopped for the night in Blood Keep?' blurted Belmonde. 'They must have been desperate.'

'Perhaps,' agreed Luc, watching as the thin strips of light filtering into the hall from behind the velvet drapes slowly crept across the floor as the sun descended behind the peaks. Fontaine caught Luc's gaze and also noticed the dimming light.

'Luc!' he exclaimed, 'the light is going! It must be later than we thought. We must leave this place!'

'It may already be too late for that,' answered Luc, hearing the rustle of dry bones from the cloister they had passed through and noticing armoured figures cloaked in shadow on the balconies above them.

'Lady protect us!' prayed Fontaine as the oaken door burst open and the previously lifeless skeletons marched relentlessly into the banqueting hall, spears and swords raised before them.

'For the Lady!' screamed Belmonde, launching himself forward, his sword smashing the first skeleton to fragments. Dust billowed around the skeletons as they attacked. Flesh and blood fought dry, withered bone, the air filling with the crack of ancient skulls and ribs. Luc hacked a skeleton apart at the waist and smashed his shield into another. Fontaine kicked the legs out from under his assailant, breaking its skull open with his boot heel. Belmonde's sword rose and fell, the blade as much a bludgeon as a cutting weapon. The skeletal warriors were no match for the knights, but no matter how many the brothers killed, there were more to take their place.

Slowly but surely they were forced back towards the fireplace, the shadowed figures above them silently watching the battle. Fontaine screamed in pain as a spear point stabbed into his unprotected shoulder, where the armoured plate had been torn away by the wolves. The thrust pitched him off balance and he fell to his knees. A sword smashed into his temple, tearing the helmet from his head. His vision blurred as blood streamed down his face.

'Fontaine!' shouted Belmonde as his brother struggled to rise.

Bony fingers grasped at Fontaine's wrists, the press of numbers preventing him from rising. He roared as the skeletons held him down, struggling to free his sword arm and kicking out desperately. He had a fleeting, horrified glimpse of a wide spear-point plunging towards him before it was rammed deep into his belly below his breastplate. It tore upwards into his heart and lungs, bursting from his back in a flood of gore. His screams trailed into a bloody gurgling as an axe split his head apart.

Belmonde hacked his brother's killer down, screaming a denial. Luc was at his side, sweeping aside the undead with brutal sword blows, but it was far too late for Fontaine Massone. Backs to the wall, Luc and Belmonde kept the skeletons at bay with desperate skill, tapping reserves of courage neither knew they possessed.

As he destroyed another skeleton, Luc felt his fury building. This wasn't how it was supposed to end! He spared a glance up at the dark balconies and the warriors watching the furious battle.

'Cowards!' he yelled as he smashed his dented shield into the grinning face of another opponent. 'Where is your honour? I am Luc Massone and I slew one of your kind! I demand you come down and face me!'

Almost as soon as he had spoken, the skeleton horde ceased their attack and took a single backward step. The hall was silent, the sudden absence of noise more unnerving than the clash of arms. Belmonde rushed to Fontaine's side, cradling his dead brother's head in his arms. Tears streaked clear trails in the dust coating his face.

'Oh my brother, what have we done?' he wept.

'Belmonde!' hissed Luc. 'Stand beside me. Now!'

His brother ignored him until Luc grabbed him by the shoulder and hauled him to his feet. Belmonde's face was twisted in grief, his sword held limply at his side. Luc smiled weakly at him. 'Fear not, brother. This will all be over soon.'

He looked towards the balconies, watching as the armoured figures slipped out of sight. The metallic rasp of armour

sounded as the watchers descended to the banqueting hall, emerging from concealed alcoves either side of the fireplace.

Three powerful warriors, clad in suits of exquisitely fashioned crimson armour stood wordlessly before the two brothers. The Blood Dragons wore no helmets, their pale, aquiline faces regarding the exhausted knights before them with expressions of faint amusement. Each carried a black bladed sword, its surface seeming to shimmer with an oily iridescence.

The knight on the left tilted his head to one side and raised his sword.

'You say you have killed a Blood Dragon?' said the vampire. 'You will forgive my scepticism, I hope?'

Like a striking snake, his sword lashed out at Luc's neck. Luc had been ready and swiftly parried, his riposte slashing towards the vampire's groin. The Blood Dragon barely had time to react, his sword flashing down to block the blow. Fast as quicksilver, Luc altered the direction of his cut and hacked off the vampire's head in a single, powerful sweep. The Blood Dragon toppled backwards, his body ashes before the armour hit the stone floor.

Luc pulled his sword back to the guard position.

'Anyone else?' he asked.

The dark haired vampire with deep violet eyes who faced Luc glanced at the empty suit of armour beside him and said, 'You are fast and skilful for a mortal. There are few alive who could have even scratched Grigorij, let alone slain him.'

Luc nodded. 'My skill with a blade is great.'

The vampire smiled. 'Where is your humility, knight? You are arrogant.'

'It is not arrogance if it is the truth,' pointed out Luc.

The Blood Dragon laughed. 'Here, in this place, you are a child amongst your betters. I could kill you in a heartbeat. You cannot hope to vanquish me. Surely you must know that?'

'I know that,' nodded Luc.

'Then why are you here?' asked the vampire. 'You have not come to slay me?'

'No,' admitted Luc as Belmonde stared at his brother in horrified fascination.

'Then why?'

Luc altered his grip on his sword and shouted, 'Because I have come to join your order!'

His blade slashed and blood geysered as Luc Massone spun round and beheaded his brother. Belmonde's corpse swayed for a brief moment, then slowly crumpled to the floor, slumped across Fontaine's lifeless body.

Luc faced the Blood Dragon and planted the sword, point first, on the stone hearth, his face alight as he met the vampire's stare.

'The blood of innocents is on my hands and I am a warrior beyond compare. Where in the mortal world can I find my equal?' hissed Luc. 'I bring you this offering of my own flesh and blood as proof of my desire. I am one of you and I demand you grant me the boon of immortality!'

Hot excitement pounded through his veins. Luc's skin flushed red, his scar a livid white line across his face. It was done. He had reached the point where all mortal laws ceased to bind him. He would become one of the ever-living, destined never to die, destined only to become the greatest warrior of the age!

The Blood Dragon watched the blood pump from Belmonde's neck and raised his eyebrows in puzzlement.

'Demand...' he said as though he had never heard the word.

'Aye,' snarled Luc. 'It is my right. I deserve this.'

The vampire knight grinned, exposing razor sharp fangs.

'Very well. you shall have what you deserve,' he promised.



THE VILLAGE OF Gugarde echoed to screams of pain and fear. Dark horses with red eyes carrying crimson armoured knights stalked the streets. No one had really believed the three knights boasted of defeating the vampires of Blood Keep when they had passed through the village some six months ago, but perhaps there had been tiny embers of hope stirred

in a few hearts. That hope was now ashes on the wind as black armoured skeletons dragged the screaming inhabitants from their beds to the slaughter.

The knights laughed as peasants ineffectually waved bundles of daemonroot before them. A venerable human with a rusty sword had been the only one prepared to fight, but there had been no honour in slaying one so old. The vampires would feed, but would not lower themselves to trade blows with those who were not worthy of their blades.

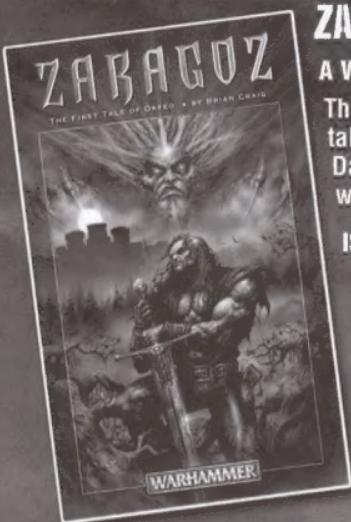
Undead warriors in rusted armour stood motionless as their masters began feeding on the villagers, zombies picking themselves up from the mud as the vampires raised the newly dead to swell their ranks. Bats flapped noisily overhead as snarling wolves padded soundlessly through the village, seeking out those who had chosen to hide from the vampires. There would be no escaping the killing.

In the walled cemetery at the village's edge, stooped creatures hugged the shadows, scrabbling at the wet ground. Pale, blotched skin hung loosely from their emaciated frames as they dug the dead from the ground. Perhaps a dozen of the vile ghouls pawed furiously at the earth, the hunger for cold, dead flesh driving their efforts. At last the group dragged out a simple casket, the largest of the fiends wrenching the coffin lid off and howling in triumph. Clawed hands reached within, desperate for the taste of human meat, but the largest creature snarled and the rest pulled back hissing.

It reached inside the coffin, tearing out the dead heart and ripping great chunks of rotten meat from the bones of the corpse. It scuttled to the cemetery walls to devour its horrific meal, unnatural hunger in its eyes.

The moon emerged from behind a cloud and the degenerate beast blinked in its unforgiving glare, noticing a small shrine lying on its side where the Blood Dragon's charge had knocked it. It stared at the shrine as a faint memory stirred, as though the sight should be familiar to it. But the memory was gone and the beast shook its head, biting deeply into the cold heart it carried and scratching idly at the long, white scar that ran from its right temple to its chin. (●)

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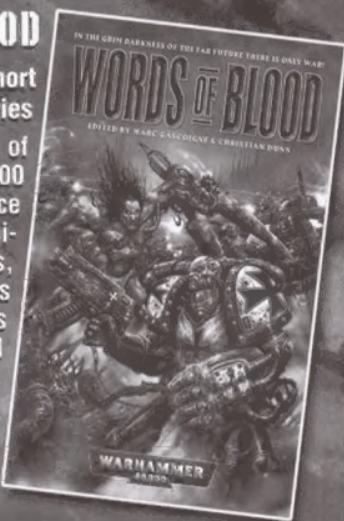
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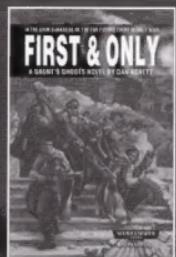
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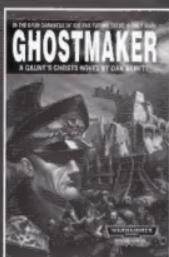
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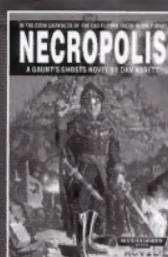
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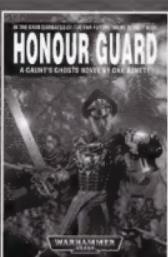
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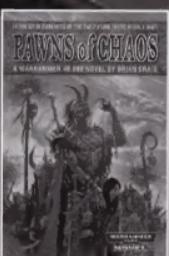
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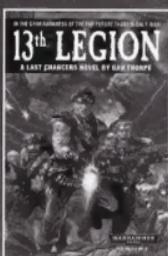
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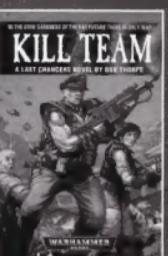
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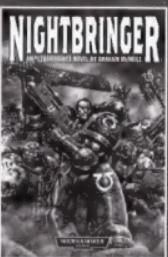
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